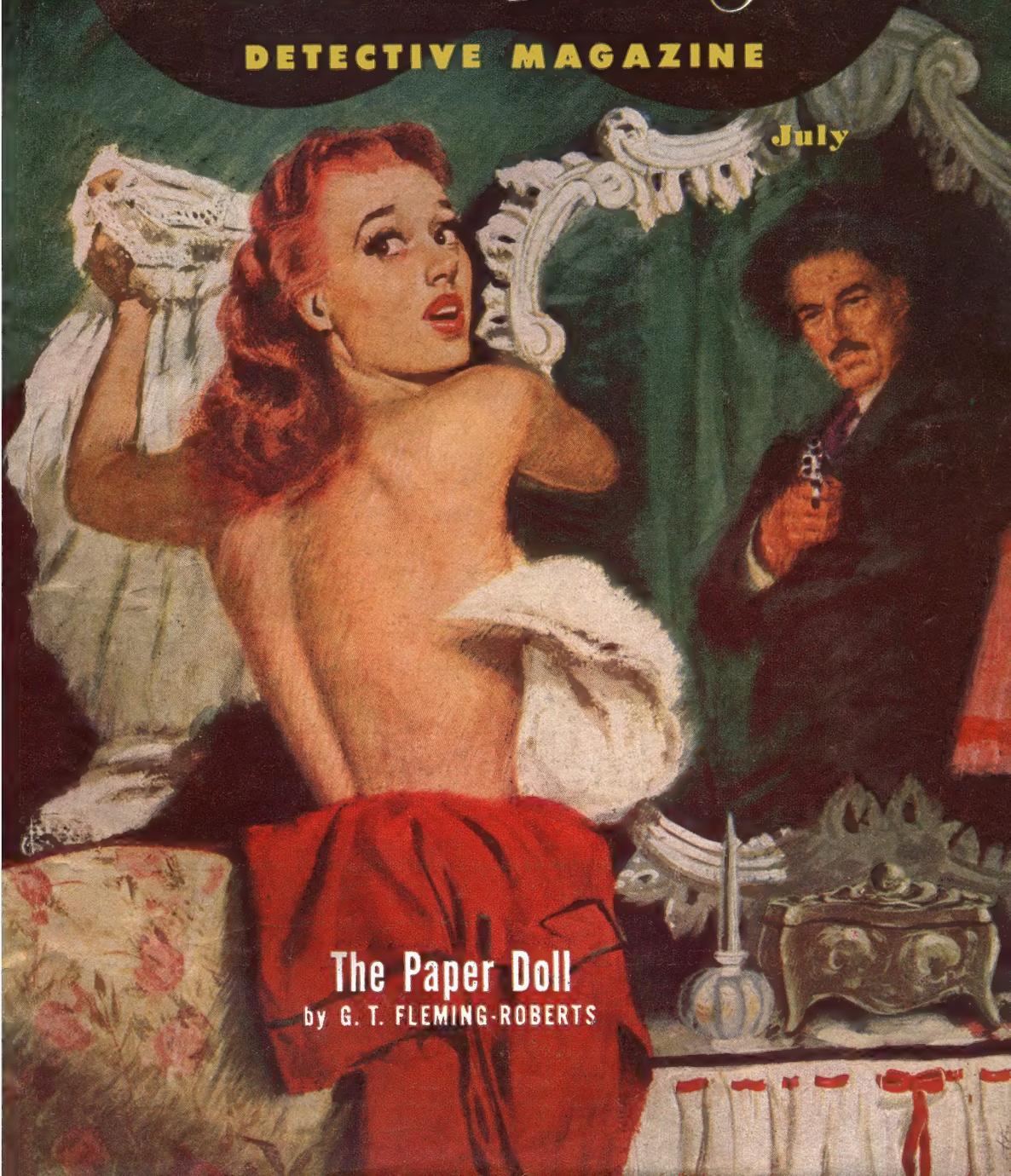


JULY, 1951

# BLACK MASK

DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

July



The Paper Doll  
by G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

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*One of the troubles with crime, as G. T. Fleming-Roberts remarks, is its prevalence among criminals. He might have added that this is also one of its greatest fascinations; criminals are, as a rule, such interesting people—and so hard to tell from the innocent. Take, for example, Janie, who thought she could reform a safe-cracker . . . or Margaret of the aquamarine eyes and the strange curiosity . . . or the entrancing Charlotte, who didn't dream the walls had ears. . . . You'll meet them all, and other intriguing folks as well, here in one of this popular author's most exciting stories.*



## The Paper Doll

by G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

**S**HE WAS one of those women you seem to remember only at night. Morgan had glimpsed her along North Meridian Street's automobile row where, he presumed, she was employed in some sales agency office. On his way to the U-Drive-It to pick up a rental, he caught shutter flashes of her through the traffic. Nice legs, he observed. Nice hips. Everything nice.

Then again, in early September, when he had a wandering husband under surveillance, Morgan ran into her at a bus stop. He noticed she carried a big purse with *Janie* in embossed

metal script on the flap. So now he had her name and the idea that her gentle mouth and her quiet gray eyes were strangers to laughter.

All right, Janie, he thought as he passed. There's so much laughter, most of it meaningless. Stay different, won't you?

But out of sight, she was also out of mind. It was only at night in his apartment-hotel room—he and the red mote of his cigarette alone in the dark, with thin dregs and a sliver of ice in his glass—that he would entertain notions of Janie. And he fully intended to do

something about her. Sometime. Maybe tomorrow. Some Tuesday, perhaps.

A Tuesday then, and he awoke at ten in the a.m. for no particular reason he could think of, propped himself on an elbow, and reached for a cigarette. He was no more shaky than usual, he concluded. He was certainly no less shaky either. He had a head, but it was not the world's largest. A medium-size head, you might call it. By the time he had showered and shaved and rinsed right out of his mouth, Western Union got to him with a telegram. Decoded, it read:

GREAT LAKES INDEMNITY AUTHORIZES  
THIRTY THOUSAND REWARD RECOVERY  
CHARLES JEWELS

COL. BLAKE

Col. Blake, in one word, boss of North American Inquiry Agencies. Col. Blake in ten words or less if it killed him. Which it might very well do. Sending cryptograms to chaps with medium-size heads!

Morgan phoned down for breakfast and a newspaper. By the time he had finished dressing there was a to-do in the hall. The quiet protests from Sam, of room service, were being loudly overruled.

"Know the man? Why, him and I are like that! Old friend of the family."

Morgan opened the door. There was Sam, grinning. There also grinned a large and lop-eared individual, about thirty, with curly, pinkish blond hair.

"Good morning, Johnny, good morning," he said. "Nice to see you again."

The old friend of the family heeled

the door shut in Sam's face, crinkled light brown eyes at Morgan. "Why, it's I—Buster."

And so it was. Buster Spindell in a hand-painted tie and a teal-blue suit with a gay bit of 'kerchief lolling out of the breast pocket, standing along side the tea wagon on splayed feet shod in tan-and-white oxfords. Buster Spindell cheerfully helping himself to toast as he had, in the past, helped himself to other more valuable things belonging to other people.

His name had first appeared on the Indianapolis police blotter when he'd blown the side out of a produce company office while trying to dynamite the safe. After reform school, he had developed a more subtle means to an identical end through a soft lead hammer and center punch. That had gone merrily on for a while until some forthright judge sent Buster to Michigan City to punch out auto license plates for the State of Indiana. Now, presumably, he was out on parole. Unless they were wearing ties hand-painted with palm trees at jail-breaks this season.

"Don't let me interrupt anything," Buster Spindell said and retired to a lounge chair with a triangle of toast on his saucer-sized palm. "Read your paper. Drink your coffee—you need it!"

Morgan picked up the newspaper and sat down on the sofa. He reached for chilled orange juice. Buster was squatting on the edge of the chair, his knees far apart so that toast crumbs would fall elsewhere than on his elegant trousers. He licked a thumb. Morgan regarded him with not much enthusiasm

for a moment, then glanced down at the paper. The name of Charles jumped out at him from under the heading:

SAFE BURGLAR SLAIN; COMPANION  
FLEES WITH \$100,000 IN JEWELS

So now he had it. A killing incidental to robbery. Mrs. Charles E. Charles of Cold Springs Road, returning from a party at 2:00 a.m., had surprised a man in front of the open wall safe in the library. She had rushed to the desk, had removed her husband's revolver from a drawer, and had emptied the gun into one Virgil "Red" Bailey, recently released from Michigan City where he'd served a stretch for armed robbery. Dr. Charles E. Charles was in Chicago attending a convention of endocrinologists. All of the Charles servants had been out at the time except the chauffeur, whom police had eventually found trussed up with a towrope in the garage.

Buster Spindell crossed to the tea wagon again. "Don't let me rush you," he said out of buttered lips, "but I'm here on business."

"I've got business," Morgan said, his eyes on the paper.

"But have I? That's the question. Johnny, this toast ain't bad." Buster heaped scrambled eggs on a wedge of toast and went back to the chair.

"I shot and I shot and then I fainted," Mrs. Charles was quoted beneath a photo that showed her holding the gun in both hands at arms length, her lower lip in her teeth, her nose crinkled, and her eyes screwed nearly shut as though firearms scared hell out of her. There

was an inset of Red Bailey, a heavy-faced man with a rocklike chin. He'd been living on South Illinois Street. He didn't seem to be survived by anyone, and possibly nobody cared about his being dead except Mrs. Charles. She'd have to redecorate. Bloodstains would probably clash with her color scheme.

So you had the socialite wife of a prominent doctor, plus Bailey the heister, the latter discovered in front of a safe that had been opened by the punch method—not a technique often acquired by specialists in armed robbery. There must have been a third party—the "Companion Flees" of the headlines. Companion Flees must have opened the safe, not Bailey. Yet Mrs. Charles had seen only Bailey. It made for confusion.

**M**ORGAN FINISHED his orange juice and drew the coffee cup into the cage of his two thin-fingered hands. He sent a long and speculative look at the cheerful blond face on the opposite side of the room. It munched toast. It licked thumbs. It was neither ornamental nor useful, unless you needed a safe punched open. And what the hell was it doing here beside munching and licking?

The usual procedure for a private detective to follow on a jewel recovery job was first to channel reward rumors onto the grapevine and then wait for an underworld contact. But when the contact, dressed in a teal-blue suit, munching toast and licking its thumbs, cropped up in one's own living room prior to the formality of the rumor, one might well ask what was this baggy-eyed old world coming to?

"What sort of business, Buster?" Morgan asked warily.

"Ah!" Buster gulped the last morsel and bounced across the room to hand out a card bearing the legend:

QUINLAN MOTOR SALES

George Spindell  
Used Car Dept.

"Down in the lower left hand corner," Morgan observed, "you have left a dandy buttery thumbprint."

Buster shrugged massively. "The past, Johnny. All over. A slate wiped clean, as the warden said. I'm here to sell you a car."

"No you're not," Morgan said.

"A scarcely used convertible formerly driven around town by a gentle old maid school teacher, clean as a ribbon, loaded with extras, and a new orchid paint job."

"No," Morgan repeated. "I don't look well in orchid."

"Have you ever tried?"

Morgan pushed the newspaper onto the tea wagon and tapped the Charles item with a thin finger. He watched the other man out of dark eyes that were narrow between faintly puffy lids. Buster picked up the paper, absently helping himself to a crisp strip of bacon.

"Uh," he said and put down the paper.

"That's all you've got to say—uh?"

"Uh-huh." Buster was all open-faced innocence.

Morgan pushed up one side of his mouth, distorting the slender black line of his mustache. "Could it be you have absorbed some of the strong moral fiber

of all these gentle old school marm's who break in cars for you dealers?"

Buster nodded and winked. "I absorb them from teachers. Through my seat of learning." He moved to the door and went out.

Morgan rose from the sofa with the uneasy feeling of having been had. He crossed to the window, parted the curtains to look out across Pennsylvania Street. There, in the tarnished September sunlight, was the orchid roadster. And the girl in it, waiting for Buster Spindell, was Janie. Sweet little Janie with her ripe-wheat gold hair floating back from a face so sober and lovely that seeing it, even casually, you recalled in a flash of regret all of the others and all of your personal tarnish.

Janie and Buster Spindell. Morgan watched them drive off and fingered a cigarette. Muscles relaxed at the thin ends of his mouth.

He thought, So she's something I made up. Drink cheap liquor and you'll have cheap illusions. . . .

Morgan went downtown to Police Headquarters because you have to start somewhere. In one of the cubicles about the periphery of the detectives' room he discovered Sergeant Hans Teihet, the gray old man of Safe-and-Loft, occupied with a small, taut, impeccably neat citizen with sleek gray temples and a lipless mouth. From the spring-wound gestures of the latter, Morgan gathered that Teihet was taking a bit of hell.

Morgan sauntered to the opposite side of the room to speak to a pair of plainclothes cops who were awaiting assignment. Presently Teihet followed

his visitor from the cubicle, the sergeant's slovenly bulges emphasized by the precise edges of the smaller man.

"Let me worry about this now, Doctor," Teilhet advised as he showed the citizen the outer corridor.

"I'll appreciate it if you will," the lipless man retorted.

Teilhet closed the door quietly and swore quietly under his breath, then started wearily back toward the cubicle. He noticed Morgan. "Revoke your license?" Teilhet asked as though he didn't even faintly suspect they had.

Morgan followed the fat sergeant into the tiny room, where Teilhet hogged a puddle of air whipped up by an eight inch fan. Morgan used the ash tray and sat down. He made his eyes look very blank.

"Why haven't you picked up Buster Spindell for the Charles job?" Morgan asked.

"Alibi." Teilhet nibbled the end of a fat cigar.

"The doll, huh?"

"Yes, if you mean Miss Williams," Teilhet said stiffly.

Morgan showed bright teeth in a kind of smile. He thought, *You, too, old Hans?* Aloud, he asked, "A big handbag doesn't mean anything to you, then?"

Teilhet scowled and pushed out his lips. "You spend too much time in Chicago. Around here the preacher's wife can carry a big purse if she wants. Spindell and Miss Williams went to a late movie last night. That good enough?"

"Only if Miss Williams doesn't happen to be lying."

TEILHET SHIFTED uneasily in his chair. "I think she's a good kid. I think she might make a man out of that boy. He's got a job at the same place she works. I don't know whether his boss knows he's a con. That's why I had him drop in here instead of barging in there."

"And he brought his alibi with him?" Morgan's smile was quick and bright.

"Why not? Hell, if he read it was a punch job he'd know what I wanted."

Morgan brought out a cigarette and rapped it on the chair arm without taking his eyes off Teilhet's sweat-streaked face. His smile remained and he let Teilhet do the talking.

"One reason I'm not much inclined to tie this on Spindell is that he called Johnson—that's his parole officer—and told him to try and stop Bailey from bothering him. Leaned over backwards, Spindell did, to avoid anything that might look like consorting with criminals."

Morgan stood, lighting his cigarette, and his eyes were shiny with malice. "You're in your dotage, Hans. I suppose we all have to crack sometime."

Teilhet rumpled his gray hair and flushed. "I still like to give kids a break. Not Buster Spindell, especially, but the girl. If she thinks she can take a boy to raise, let's give her a chance. Live and let live, huh?"

"Sure," Morgan agreed coolly. "Just as long as I get my share of the living." He paused in the door. "Was that Dr. Charles E. Charles who just left in a blizzard of horseradish?"

Teilhet nodded, his eyes glum. Morgan said, "Well, thanks," and went out

to use the public phone in the outer corridor. He called Guy Nash, an ex-cop who held a private operatives' license and was glad to take a job now and then to augment his slender retirement pay. Morgan asked Guy if he'd read about the Charles job in the paper. Guy said he had.

"For 'companion flees,'" Morgan explained, "I like Buster Spindell employed at Quinlan Motors. Stay on him. Call in at seven, and I'll pick up wherever you are."

Morgan then went out into the heat and walked east to South Illinois Street. The former address of Red Bailey, the dead gunman, was a bar that had once had nightclub aspirations. The scheme of decor threaded tenuously from two cocoanuts on the backbar to an artificial palm that rustled faded crepe paper fronds in the blast of a twenty-inch fan. The Cocoanut Club, but of course. There was a tiny dance floor and a stage where a chorus of anyway four gorgeous girls might have cavorted. The electric organ was neatly placarded *For Sale*. Over these dried bones of live entertainment the inevitable robot of illuminated plastic beat its chest triumphantly in canned jungle rhythm.

The one waitress wore bobby-socks with high-heeled pumps. Of her, Morgan thought, nothing more need be said. He liked the barkeep—a hunchback with the pitifully eager eyes of the very lonely.

She of the bobby-socks came to the bar and said, "Shorty, an ale." She said something else which Morgan didn't catch but which directed the hunchback's glance toward one of the

booths on the opposite side of the room.

"The horsey set, we got," Shorty said into the beer cooler and winked at Morgan. "Ain't it a kick."

Morgan looked around and met a pair of eyes as black as his own. They were closely spaced in a small, almost delicate face. The mouth was cruel. The man's body seemed to belong to somebody else—too broad through the shoulders for the tiny head. He wore a blue shirt open at the throat, dark gray breeches, black shoes and leather puttees which he slapped in time to the music with a rawhide quirt.

Morgan turned again to the barkeep. "Take away the whip, put a stiffvizored cap and a tie on the guy. What've you got?"

Shorty tried that. "Somebody's chauffeur?"

Morgan nodded. "You're not so damned exclusive as you thought, are you?" He watched Shorty reach for another glass to polish. "Tell me about Bailey."

The hunchback's busy little hands were suddenly still. "He isn't here."

"I know where he is. But he lived here since when?"

"Since last week." Shorty went on drying the glass but carefully now, as though it were fine crystal. "First I ever seen of him. He came in and asked for George."

"George who?" Morgan asked, over his glass. "Spindell?"

"Yeah, that's the name. But I'd never heard of the guy. I'm new here. Just bought the business." Shorty was still polishing the same glass. "You should've seen Bailey start to wreck the juke.

Geez, what a guy! Just 'cause it couldn't play *Paper Doll*. That old tune."

Morgan nodded, remembering. "That's funny. Bailey outlived that recording by about six years."

"I told him it was dead," Shorty explained. "'Get it,' he says, and then shoved me to the stairway back there and on up to my room. Geez, what a guy!"

"Ran you out of your own room, huh?"

"Yeah, stuck fifty bucks in my hand for rent and says he was taking over. So I moved to the back room and—"

Shorty's last word stuck out over-loud for the jukebox had run out of nickels. Still there was music. A phonograph playing somewhere in the building. Upstairs, Morgan thought. And *Paper Doll* was the tune. He glanced across the bar at the hunchback, and Shorty's smile was sickly. Morgan drained his glass.

He said, "Red Bailey's ghost didn't lose any time, did it?"

## CHAPTER TWO

A DAME, SHORTY had said. Some crazy dame who'd given him five dollars for a glimpse of Red Bailey's room. A sensation seeker. Or she was writing a book, looking for color. If color was what she wanted, she could have it, Morgan thought. Green. Seasick green on the walls of the upstairs hall. There were crusted windows along one side, three doors in the other. There was a dangling light bulb and a radiator. There were other little things that scurried underfoot, and one wasn't quick

enough and died with a dry crunch of sound.

The front room, Shorty had said. A board in the uneven floor creaked under Morgan's weight. From the dead man's room came the recorded voice of a whining tenor who vowed he would buy a paper doll that he could call his own. Morgan turned the knob all the way over, held, pushed the door open a crack.

She was there, about five feet from Morgan, standing at the end of an oblong table, her back to the door. And never in its palmiest days had the Cocoanut Club seen the like. She was strictly North Side from the slim heels of her forty-dollar gray reptile pumps to the simple piece of gray felt molded to the back of her head. Her hair was unalloyed platinum, what he could see of it. Her soft gray suit clung where it ought to cling, and where it ought to have followed the long, lovely lines of her figure, it followed cunningly.

Her gray purse was at the opposite end of the table beside a lamp with a paper shade. There was the pint-sized record player loaded with only the one disk. There was the telephone which the woman had evidently been using, for her white-gloved right hand came away from the handset as Morgan pushed the door back and stepped to the side of the table between the lady and her purse. He took off his hat.

"Startle you?" he asked politely.

Behind harlequin glasses her large pale eyes widened and then dropped toward her purse. She bit her lower lip slightly, gave that up, looked at him out of a composed oval face that was

golden-hued deepening to sepia in the hollows beneath her cheekbones. Her nose was the haughty sort, her mouth thin and mobile, the lips carefully rouged. Her eyes were on an exact level with his own, their pale irises delicately rimmed with ink-blue.

"You're the police?" she asked above the recorded crooning of muted trumpets.

"Private." He smiled, pleased with her face and not then much concerned with what went on behind it. "Morgan is the name."

"Smith here." Which was not very original of her, provided she had anything to do with it. "Margaret Smith." Her voice was cello-timbered, and he thought her slight, contemptuous smile was not a personal thing; rather it had to do with her present situation.

Morgan turned off the record player. He then offered Margaret Smith a cigarette. When she declined it, he lighted it for himself, watching her through the thin veil of smoke. He included the room in a gesture.

"Why?"

She shrugged. "One is always reading about some person who's been murdered—" She had noticed the sudden lift of Morgan's black brows. "Slain, then. Justifiable homicide, if you like. Anyway, it's never anybody one knows, and I've always wondered what they were like—these people things happen to."

He picked up her purse, noticing as he did so that Margaret Smith, who was probably not Margaret Smith, had swayed toward him, her gloved hand tentatively extended.

"If you please. My purse."

Her scent was something unobtrusive—lavender, perhaps. Her smile was small and sure, and he didn't happen to like small sure smiles that afternoon. Putty he might be, but he did not care to find himself advertised on the face of an expert putty manufacturer. So he put his cigarette in his mouth and tipped his head to keep the writhing column of smoke out of his eyes and used both hands to open her purse.

He said, "Try me again sometime. I'm no snob, but our surroundings aren't up to the Morgan manner."

She stepped back, affronted, and showed him a profile that was cameo cut. He looked down into her purse. Light blue and navy tissue choked the interior. It might have been gift wrapping she'd stuffed in there for lack of a wastebasket. Morgan brought it out, and it expanded to attain definite and incredible shape.

Panties. A pair of pale blue panties made entirely of tissue paper including the navy trim and the coy pompon attached to one leg.

Morgan squinted through smoke at Margaret Smith. Her aquamarine eyes returned his look without warmth.

"Bailey's," she said.

"Bailey's?" he echoed. "Listen, baby, I'm trying to accept a situation in which I have Margaret Smith, who doesn't have to be Margaret Smith but who is definitely fashionable North Side, in a roach-ridden flat above a bankrupt bistro playing *Paper Doll* on a dead heister's phonograph. That much I will try to buy because I have eyes in my head. But I am not prepared to swallow the

one-time existence of a heister who wore tissue paper undies."

**H**ER MASK broke into laughter. "He didn't *wear* them—he collected them. There are two more pairs in the bureau. He must have been a fetishist." As though she could add to the razzle-dazzle by dragging in Freud.

Morgan shook his head. "Red Bailey wasn't killed with paper wads while breaking into a paper doll house to steal some paper doll's panties," he told her. "You're the scanties snatcher around here, and you're going to tell me how come if I have to keep at it all night."

"I told you," she insisted. She had started to pick worry off the ends of her gloved fingers where it stuck like feathers to molasses. "It was simply curiosity."

"It gets you trouble," he said and then glanced toward the open door, for he had heard the creak of that informative board in the uneven floor of the hall. There was the pinhead: Shorty's member of the horsey set who, with some alterations, became somebody's chauffeur.

Standing, his disproportion was even more pronounced than it had been in the booth of a taproom below. He was built like a tick—short and wide, with that tiny head. His black, close-set eyes had noticed the purse and the panties in Morgan's hands.

"I thought this was the men's room," he said with an insolent smile. He came in anyway and stood with his feet wide apart and flicked his leather puttees with the quirt. His eyes shifted to

the woman. She seemed to gain inches of height under his glance and she stood very still.

Morgan said, "You two seem to have met." While they were eyeing each other, he stuffed the tissue paper panties into the side pocket of his coat.

The man with the quirt said, "You'd better go, Mrs. Charles. I'm surprised at you."

She hesitated an instant, then took a step toward Morgan. "Albert, make him give me my purse."

Albert didn't have to. If she was Mrs. Charles then she was not Margaret Smith, though Morgan still couldn't associate her with the news photo. He handed her the purse, and she turned swiftly and went through the door. She had a nice walk.

Albert kicked the door shut behind her. He smacked his putts with the quirt and spread his mouth thin. "You stay out of the Charles caper, see, or I'll skin you alive."

"You're the boss, huh?" Morgan crowded a step forward, his smile watery, his mind tight. If it had to come, it might as well come now.

The quirt snarled in the air and slashed out at Morgan's face. But Albert had extended himself farther than prudent. Morgan took part of the blow on his left shoulder, and as the lash coiled around the back of his neck, he caught Albert's right wrist in both hands. Then it was a matter of turning and yanking and bending almost to the floor so that Albert spilled over Morgan's right hip. There were sounds to indicate that Albert had found the floor without undue effort.

### The Paper Doll

Morgan straightened quickly, dark face flushed. He started toward Albert, who was now on his backside between the bed and the table, crabbing around, his right hand behind him. His delicate face was pale and cruel and spit flew from his lips as he spoke.

"You shifty louse! Ever judo a slug?"

Morgan stopped. Albert's right hand had reappeared holding a stubby automatic.

"Small," Morgan said of the gun. "Also noisy."

"You don't care," Albert panted. He stood. "With a slug in the brain you don't hear so good. I'm telling you to get out and stay out, and if I ever find you snooping around the Charles place I'll put one in you for a peeping tom."

Morgan made sounds like laughter. "You don't think I'd make a good safe burglar?"

"You look a hell of a lot more like a peeper to me and it gets you just as dead." Albert extended his lower lip and spat on the floor. "Now get out and stay out."

Morgan picked up his hat from the table, turned his back to the gun, and went out.

Minutes later he had crossed Kentucky Avenue to the Lincoln Hotel. The lobby was air-conditioned, and his heat-wilted body gratefully soaked up coolness. He took an elevator to the second floor, went down a corridor toward a blue neon sign that read: *PHIL DUMAS, ARTISTS MANAGEMENT.*

Phil Dumas looked less like a booking agent than a professor of economics,

being thin, scholarly, and concerned. He looked through shiny rimless glasses at the tissue panties Morgan tossed onto the desk.

"Can you associate those with the tune *Paper Doll* and come up with any startling information?" Morgan asked.

Phil Dumas appeared more scholarly and concerned than ever. "There was Patty Bryce, a stripper. She had a new twist."

"Where did she twist it?" Morgan wanted to know. He sat down in a chair and stretched lean legs in front of him.

"She was slightly terrific at a joint called the Cocoanut Club for a week five, maybe six years ago. She was booked as the Paper Doll, see? Stiff paper dresses," Phil Dumas explained. "Silhouettes they were, actually, with shoulder tabs. She'd work down to these—" indicating the panties, "then toss them to the nearest male patron as she skipped into the wings." He shook his head. "Slightly terrific. The cops closed the joint."

"Then what happened to her?" Morgan persisted.

"Chicago. They're more broad-minded there. But I heard she was dead."

"Pneumonia probably," Morgan quipped. "Paper moths got into her wardrobe."

Phil Dumas made a wry face. "My union forbids I should laugh at non-professionals."

Morgan laughed. Somebody had to. "Have you some glossies of Patty Bryce?"

Phil Dumas shook his head. "I did-

n't book her. She was on her own, self-promoting, a B-girl with an idea. Personally, I've never seen the lady. I just heard how her act ran."

Morgan stood. "Well thanks for a nice try."

"Not at all. Any time, John." Phil Dumas waved the paper panties. "Take these with you. My wife mightn't understand."

**M**ORGAN WENT down into the cool lobby again, sought out the battery of telephones, and placed a long-distance call to North American Inquiry in Chicago. When he had the home office switchboard, he asked for McGowan, a woman—some small wheel in the inter-office setup. He always asked for McGowan. Once, at three in the a.m., he had called the home office and talked to McGowan. She was something like God, he thought, for while he had never seen her she always seemed to be there when she was needed.

Now she was on the wire again, her voice crisp and efficient. He said, "I'd like publicity prints of a stripper named Patty Bryce who was booked as the Paper Doll. She's thought to have invaded Chicago from here five or six years ago, and I've heard she's dead."

"Just a minute," said the unruffled voice of McGowan. She must have been writing. He wondered what she was like and just what she had been doing in the office at three a.m. that time. He smiled to himself. Maybe he'd been wrong about McGowan. The Devil, too, kept odd hours.

"Yes, Mr. Morgan?" she prompted. "Just one or two pictures. Can do?"

"I'll give it my best."

"McGowan, I love you," he said. "God or devil."

"Why, Mr. Morgan, you must be drunk!"

Yet she had sounded less shocked than relieved. Maybe McGowan, too, had wondered. . . .

Morgan's rented sedan flaunted white plumes of dust along Dr. Charles E. Charles' crushed stone drive. The place was a miniature plantation behind a quarter mile of box-trimmed hedge. Like crocheted doilies stiffened with sugar, circular settees of white-painted wrought iron surrounded the trunks of big elms in a billiard cloth lawn. But the elms were dead and in dying had left the house stark and inhospitable in the glare.

Dr. Charles was not at home. The butler—a faint beery odor about him suggested he had been pleasantly engaged with a cold bottle somewhere—took Morgan's card to Mrs. Charles and returned presently to announce that the lady was at home. Morgan was led through a spacious living room where not much imagination was needed to tie forbidding ribbons arm-to-arm on the valuable period chairs. Mrs. Charles was in the basement, it seemed.

"Doing the laundry, no doubt," Morgan suggested. But the quip was lost on the butler, whose beer was getting warm and flat. He opened a door at the foot of the basement stairs and then withdrew.

In the social room beyond, a woman in black satin lounging pajamas lay inverted on a red leather chaise, her hips,

shoulders and dark head on the seat, her legs extended up across the tilted backrest with her small sandaled feet considerably higher than her head. One hand cuddled a chimney glass half full of sloe gin, while the other held Morgan's card up against the indirectly illuminated ceiling.

"My God," she said, "not another policeman!"

It was timed to his entrance. She rolled her head to the left and looked at him, and she was not Mrs. Charles. Or else she was, and there were two of them.

She brought her feet down from the ceiling, turned, sat up with her legs coiled under her. She did all this without scramble. She was supple, all quickness of a mercurial sort. Her hair, black and lusterless as soot, was artfully arranged to suggest it hadn't been arranged at all. It tangled sweetly above a heart-shaped face defined by a pointed chin and high-arched brows that lent her green eyes an expression of perpetual surprise. Or, it was an expression of having been surprised so often before you came along that nothing you would ever do could possibly surprise her. You had a choice and the ripe red mouth tempted you to accept the latter.

He came toward her, his smile wary. She stood angrily, taller than he had anticipated but not as tall as another Mrs. Charles who called herself Margaret Smith. His eyes went wandering along the embroidered row of melting Dali watches that ran diagonally across her blouse and dripped gold on otherwise unrelieved black satin. Not, he

thought, that any relief was necessary. A figure such as hers would contribute less than nothing toward monotony. Apparently frank admiration was the correct approach. When he got back to her face, he found her eyes had softened.

"I'm sorry I was rude," she apologized to him.

"I didn't notice."

"Uhm—you didn't notice what?" With a warm laugh, she reseated herself on the red leather chaise.

"I don't think I noticed anything I wasn't supposed to notice," Morgan said.

"Quick." She nodded her moppet's head. "For a policeman." She glanced down at his card again and then examined him curiously. "Did the Deadly Double hire you?" He was not as quick this time. "Charlie Charlie," she said impatiently. "The country doctor. John Hopkins' gift to sluggish thyroids."

"I'm in this for the insurance company," Morgan explained. "Your jewels were insured, as you no doubt know."

She grew round-eyed over not knowing. "Nobody told me. How was I to know?"

"Your husband probably took out the policy."

"But he might have told me," she said pettishly. "I'd just like to know what goes on around here once in a while."

She turned, her mouth sullen, and swayed to a red-and-chrome bar against a wall of pickled pine. She seemed to be a little drunk, but for a woman who

had killed a man not fifteen hours before, she was doing fine.

### CHAPTER THREE

**M**ORGAN THOUGHT that this was more like it. Pleasant surroundings, and Mrs. Charles might develop into congenial people. One of the troubles with crime, he had discovered, was its prevalence among criminals.

When she put his brimming glass of bourbon-over-ice on the bar, the glass lighted up with neon inside its hollow wall.

"That's quite a gadget."

"It was quite a goiter," Mrs. Charles said, and included the entire bar in a somewhat tipsy gesture. "We have this to fondly remember Mrs. VanWyck's operation."

They drank and she refilled his glass and he said, "Whoa! That's damned near an office call you've got in there now."

She laughed. "I've got damned near a consultation fee in me already. You want to catch up, don't you?"

It seemed a fine idea. "But it gets you trouble," he said.

"I've got trouble." She propped elbows on the bar, looking gloomy. "I'd like to know why in the great burning hell I had to go and put all five slugs in that big red Irishman."

"Well, it's like this," he tried to explain. "When a man kills a snake he drops a rock on its head. But a woman gets a hoe and chops the snake into little bits of pieces."

She didn't get it at all. "I didn't use a hoe," she said. Shuddering slightly,

she picked up her glass and went back to the chaise.

He found her easy to follow. She had saved a portion of the chaise for him, as though the room were crowded, and this she patted cozily. He sat down beside her, rested forearms on thin knees, and studied Mrs. Charles' profile. It still didn't look like the newspaper photo, but then she had been making a face.

He asked finally, "What was Bailey doing while you were getting the gun out of the desk?"

"Looking inside the safe." She stared fixedly at the floor. "Then he turned and lunged at me and, I shot and I shot—"

"Then you fainted. You were all alone?"

"Except for Albert." She uttered a scornful laugh. "Albert was all tied up in the garage. Somebody bopped Albert, but isn't it funny—he didn't have a lump to show for it."

Morgan sipped from his glass. "Did the safe burglar leave any of his tools behind?"

She nodded. "Wasn't that sweet of him? Our tools. Stuff from the garage."

"How's that again?" he asked, eyes clouded with doubt.

"A hammer and stuff he got from our garage. That's when he bopped Albert. If he was bopped."

It was the first time Morgan had ever encountered a boxman who left his tools at home. "Must be a plumber," he said whimsically. He put his glass down on a nearby table. Mrs. Charles asked if he'd have another re-

fill, and he said, "Thanks, no. It gets you trouble."

"Gets you fun first," she said archly.

He said, "Let's focus while I still know my name and occupation. Describe the stolen jewels."

"Emeralds. My second-hand emeralds."

"Why second hand?"

"They were Margaret Smith's, Charles' first wife. He's such a stinker she wouldn't take anything from him, not even his name." The second Mrs. Charles patted away a yawn and stood, quick and liquid. Morgan watched her go to the bar for a short one. She then came back to stand at the end of the chaise, her lips apart and moist from her drink. She knelt with one knee on the chaise, looked at him through half-closed eyes. "Johnny, I'm scared."

"Of what?" He made room for her. Plenty of room, thinking a smart ladie would get up and leave, but who wants to be that smart?

"Of what, Charlotte, you say."

"Charlotte."

"Don't know."

She leaned toward him, her mouth sulky, green eyes up to no good whatever, gave him a little push that sent his shoulders against the backrest, and then smoothly nestled into his arms. He tried to kiss her, but she turned her head. Her soot-black hair was harsh against his mouth. Harsh and dead.

"No, Johnny, just hold me like I was a little girl who bumped her head or something."

"That," he said, "draws pretty heavily upon the imagination."

It struck her funny. She pushed up

from him, laughing. He made his second try good, and her kiss was warm and searching and distinctly favored with sloe berries.

She sat up suddenly, her head tipped, listening. "Honey, wasn't that a car in the drive?"

He considered her pleasantly through half-closed eyes and shaped his numb lips into a smile. "I wouldn't know. I have an absolutely one-track mind."

Upstairs, a door closed. Neat footsteps tracked across the ceiling of the social room. Charlotte twisted to face him, her eyes shiny with alarm. "Dammit, honey, get that stuff off your mouth, quick. Here, let me—"

She was over him instantly, and she jerked out something that had worked its way to the top of Morgan's coat pocket. Something she might have supposed to be a handkerchief but which blossomed into blue tissue paper panties. She stood slowly, her puzzled stare on the crazy thing in her hand.

"You and your one-track mind!" Charlotte said under her breath. She dropped the panties into his lap and flew to the door.

THE NEAT footsteps were on the basement stairs. Morgan scrubbed at his mouth with his handkerchief, wadded that and the panties out of sight, came to his feet as the door opened. Charlotte Charles was between him and the small man with the sleek gray temples and lipless mouth—a man all edges and taut drawn wire—but for all her quickness she wasn't quick enough to pull much wool over those colorless eyes. Morgan was first aware of suspicion

and then pain on the doctor's face. Then nothing—it was just a face, a tight cork in a bottle of seething emotion.

Charlotte was really pouring it on. Her double darling, she called the doctor. "You're late, double darling."

"Late?" It was a dry snap of sound. Dr. Charles kissed his wife absently and then put her aside like a piece of bric-a-brac won at a carnival. His eyes sought Morgan's and clashed with them. "I don't believe I know you, sir."

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Charlotte was prettily dismayed. "It's Mr. Morgan, darling. He's a private detective, and it's about the robbery."

The double Charles made it apparent he did not intend to shake hands. "I am not aware that I hired a private investigator," he said in his neat, dry manner.

"You entered a claim on a Great Lakes Indemnity policy," Morgan explained, not smiling. "Automatically, it's my baby."

Charlotte looked from one to the other like a gamin expecting a street brawl. The doctor touched a button beneath the switch-plate at the side of the door. He drew in his mouth, pulled down neat gray brows, and continued his study of Morgan.

"I see. Then if it is automatic, as you say, and therefore unavoidable, may I suggest you conduct your investigation elsewhere? It should be fairly apparent the jewels are not around here, otherwise I should not have filed the claim."

Morgan nodded agreeably. "But I do need a complete description of the

missing articles for the records."

"That you may acquire from the police," said Dr. Charles as the butler appeared in the door. "Good afternoon, sir."

Instead of immediately returning to his car after he had been brushed off the veranda, Morgan sauntered around the side of the house and toward the garage—a three-car, white-painted building with a half story above for the chauffeur's quarters. He sidled between the doctor's business coupe and a black town sedan to reach the stairway that led to the floor above. He could hear water running through a pipe and somebody whistling *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*.

The door at the head of the stairs was unlocked, and Morgan entered a large, very warm room with four dormer windows, pleasantly furnished for both living and sleeping. The somebody was taking a shower beyond a white enamelled door at the north end. There were dark gray breeches, a blue shirt, underwear and socks piled on a chair, and black leather shoes and puttees were heaped on the floor beneath. An old radio gave forth with a soap opera on an end table beside a comfortable lounge chair.

Morgan went to the chair where the clothes were piled. Albert's gun was a recognizable lump in the breeches pocket. He pushed all the clothing to the floor, sat down, and lighted a cigarette. The water continued to splash in the bath, Albert kept whistling, and the bickering couple on the radio were working into a dramatic interlude that would doubtless culminate in a com-

mercial. The woman sounded a lot like Charlotte Charles, which shows what a kiss can do in the way of stimulating the imagination. Morgan listened.

She: *"But darling, I never saw the man before."*

He: *"Well, you didn't have to receive him in that—that indecent costume."*

She: (a purring laugh) *"Who gave me this indecent costume and said the silly melted watches reminded him of how much time he'd wasted?"*

Morgan got up, jolting ashes from his cigarette, and went to the radio. He turned the station selector, but Charlotte Charles' voice came through anyway:

*"So maybe I am a little drunk, Charlie Charlie. You don't know what I've gone through. You don't know what it's like to kill a man even if it is some ol' burglar."*

Charlie Charlie remained silent.

She: (coaxingly) *"You're staying home tonight?"*

He: *"I'm going back to the hospital right now."* (A door slammed.)

She: (quietly) *"Well, the hell with you!"*

There was no commercial.

A smile tugged at the corner of Morgan's mouth as he returned to the chair and sat down. The shower had stopped running. The whistler had become a singer, still to the tune of *The Battle Hymn Of The Republic*. "Oh, she stepped into the water and it came up to her knees. Oh, she stepped into the—Well, I'll be damned, look who's here!"

Morgan looked over his right shoulder at the pinhead man in the bathroom door. Albert was wearing an old pair of scuffs and a white terrycloth robe that exposed kinky black hair on his broad, flat chest.

"Hi," Morgan said cheerfully, the bourbon still with him. "You missed an exciting episode of Charlie's Other Wife."

**A**LBERT STARED without comprehension for a moment, then took gliding steps to the radio and turned it off. He picked up a cigarette which he didn't light and stared at Morgan as though wondering what ought to be done with him.

"Can't Dr. Charles turn off that mike in the house?" Morgan asked.

Albert nodded. "He must've forgot. Your car gave him the ants."

"Papa's little tattle-tale," Morgan said and smiled widely. "That's what you are, Albert." The chauffeur's delicate yet cruel face remained puzzled. "Did you know the first Mrs. Charles was in Red Bailey's room before you joined us?"

"No." Albert sat down slowly on the arm of the chair.

"What did you expect to find?"

"I pick up what I can where I can," Albert admitted frankly. He lighted his cigarette. His cheeks hollowed and his black eyes squinted. "Like what would you pay me I don't tell Doc what you and little Charlotte was up to?"

Morgan appeared surprised. Then, "Well, that's only business, with the sweet setup you've got here. What does the other guy pay?"

"A—" Albert broke off and stood angrily. "What other guy?"

Morgan dropped his cigarette into an ash tray, tipped back in the chair, and regarded the chauffeur with thinly veiled amusement.

"You're blackmailing Charlotte, aren't you? But she's not too well heeled. You think there's something not kosher about the robbery-killing last night, and you're trying to latch onto something that'll let you get your hooks into the doctor, who seems to have plenty of lettuce. You're not only built like a tick; you've got some of a tick's parasitic attributes."

Albert muttered a curse, turned, went to the chest of drawers, and began to lay out clean linen. "You know what I said I'd do if I caught you snooping around here?"

Morgan stiffened slightly in the chair as Albert swung around with a Colt .45 in his fist. The chauffeur grinned around his cigarette and glided his scuffs across the room. He didn't seem too sure of his marksmanship.

"I got two of 'em, see? A mama size and a papa size. This is papa." He shoved the Colt into Morgan's face. "Papa don't 'low no peepin' 'round this house."

A dry scuff of sound came in through an open window. Footsteps on the crushed stone drive.

Albert said, "And don't think Doc won't back me up. I worked for him twelve years and what I say goes around here."

Albert had a sobering point there. The doctor's footsteps were plainly audible in the garage below. Morgan slid

down a little in the chair and tried not to look as though he intended to kick Albert's right kneecap off. Albert, telepathic, stepped back so hurriedly that he left one dirty white scuff on the floor like a footprint. He laughed uneasily and flicked a glance toward the door at the head of the steps.

"Caught a snooper, Doe."

Dr. Charles walked stiffly into the room and approached Morgan's chair. The emotionless face of the doctor wore a grayish pallor. Wrinkles like hair-cracks in plaster crossed his lipless mouth. All of the steel springs within him were wound tight.

"I think, Albert," the doctor said, "your choice of weapons rather flattens the man."

And he hit Morgan in the side of the face with a small fist, rocking the thin man in the chair, and then stepped back as though startled by his own temerity. Morgan stood tall and lathlike, the color spreading across his face, his long hands open at his sides. The doctor pointed to the door with a quivering finger, and whatever neat little speech he had prepared was choked up within him by his fury.

Morgan nodded. "I can take a hint. Just one word of advice: Watch Albert. He's trying to put the hooks in you."

Morgan moved without haste through the door, down the steps, and out of the garage. The sun was lowering, copperish through the haze, and the big white house was clutched in gnarled fingers of shadow cast by the dead elms. Morgan regained his car, drove into the street and north to turn around at the next driveway and park

within a few hundred feet of the Charles gate. He waited, his tongue exploring the cut inside his cheek.

Perhaps five minutes passed before the doctor's gray coupe came barreling out of the crushed stone drive to make a screaming turn to the south. Morgan tramped his accelerator and chased the coupe as far as 30th Street, the cross-town artery. At this point he was close enough to recognize the driver as Albert—not the double Charles. It was about what he had expected. A jealous husband behaving according to pattern.

It was 4:30 p.m. when Morgan entered his rooms at the apartment-hotel. He went down to the phone and made an effort to trace down Red Bailey's antecedents through the editorial offices of the local papers. It was not until he got around to the *Times* that he found a sob sister who was working on a supplement feature on local habitual criminals and how they got that way. Red Bailey had been left an orphan at an early age, his father a Southern Indiana coal miner, his mother one Mary Agnes Sullivan born in Ireland.

Morgan expressed thanks, hung up, went into the bedroom where he stripped to his shorts and stretched himself out on the bed. He slept soundly until Guy Nash telephoned.

## CHAPTER FOUR

**D**USK DEEPENED along 34th Street as Jane Williams opened a card table in the bay window of her second story flat in the red brick building next to the

drugstore on the corner. She then spread a gay print cloth and set out table service for two. Morgan watched her from the opposite side of the street where he'd parked his rental car in front of a convenient tavern. He watched her because it gave him pleasure and because he couldn't possibly watch Buster Spindell. Buster lived in a room over the drugstore, and if he came down to the street, he would have to emerge at the door next to the last show window of this side of the drugstore building.

Guy Nash had said on the phone, "You want to pick it up here. Subject came home about an hour ago with a blonde doll who works at Quinlan Motors."

So Morgan had met Guy Nash at the tavern. It had been an uneventful day for the latter. Subject had done nothing even faintly suspicious, unless selling a beat-up roadster with an orchid paint job could be so construed. Later, the subject had made a quick trip to Dr. Charles' office downtown. As soon as Buster had entered the consultation room, Guy Nash had approached the office nurse to learn from her that Buster was a regular patient of the doctor's.

"He's regular, maybe," Morgan had said to Guy, "but I'm not too sure about the patient part of it. Think you can find out what ails Buster, if anything?" Which was a large order, doctors being close-mouthed as they are, but Guy promised to have a go at it first thing in the morning.

Morgan lighted a cigarette from a glowing butt and watched Janie place a

bouquet of blue flowers in the center of the table. In a sheer floral print dress and a frilly white apron, she was something to look at. Some article on the table required straightening. Janie straightened it, playing house so earnestly it put a lump in your throat. Because Buster Spindell wasn't worth this. Maybe nobody was.

Morgan tried to understand Janie and how it was with her. Between her and Buster there was youth and proximity at home and at work. Either she'd found him the room or the job. There would be pity, too, on Janie's side, and maybe something of the reformist as in so many women—an urge to take the hard rough clod, moisten it with kindness, and then remold it. And if she had faith in him, if Buster lied well enough, she'd have provided his alibi to help him avoid persecution from the police.

Janie, Morgan thought, was a very nice thing to happen to anyone. And then he was telling himself that he really knew nothing about her. She was two-dimensional, a doll he'd cut out of paper when in the mood for cutting out dolls. He'd fashioned her to a pattern—no party girl, not sophisticat-ed, but somebody who would be nice to talk to at the end of a day when a skip had eluded him or a divorce plant had blown up in his face.

Morgan's attention shifted to the door at the side of the drugstore building where Buster Spindell appeared wearing a gray-green slack suit. His face was scrubbed pink, his pink-blond hair wetted down. The boy look was there. And the brute look too. After

a furtive glance in either direction, he stepped to the curb, waited for a break in traffic, and then jaywalked directly toward Morgan's car.

Now what the hell, Morgan wondered.

"Hi-yah, Johnny, ol' pal!" Buster dropped a heavy hand on Morgan's arm. "Janie's having me over for dinner."

So rub it in, Morgan thought. He didn't say anything.

"I got to thinking, as long as you're hanging around, whyn't you up and eat with me and Janie?"

"No thanks," Morgan said stiffly. He withdrew his arm from the sill. "I'm a busy man, Buster. I've got to find somebody to take thirty grand reward off my hands for the return of the Charles jewels."

"Sorry I can't help you there, Johnny," Buster said. But his grin was sly and it made you wonder. It was, Morgan thought, intended to make you wonder. He watched Buster return to the other side of the street and enter the building where Janie lived. Then Morgan switched on the ignition and kicked angrily at the starter. To tell with a caper where the suspicious characters dressed up in pretty halos while the so-called nice people behaved like thieves at a picnic.

When he traded early dark for the small hushed lobby of his apartment-hotel, Morgan was beckoned to the desk by Benny, the night clerk. There was a telegram, and as Benny handed over the buff envelope, he added, "And a Mr. Ashley to see you. He's in the taproom with a lady."

"Ashley," Morgan repeated absently. He knew no Ashley. Morgan ripped the envelope. The enclosed wire from Col. Blake in Chicago was not coded.

CHARLES JEWELS RECOVERED  
HERE. DROP INVESTIGATION

Which was a fine thing, actually, Morgan thought. *If* he could drop it. If murder was something you could just walk away from, this was a fine thing.

He drummed lightly on the desk. "This Ashley now—he wouldn't be wearing a white gardenia so I'd know him, perchance?"

Benny laughed. "He is wearing a platinum blonde in a picture hat, and you've heard that old one about boys seldom make passes at girls who wear glasses? She'll give you a new slant on that."

MORGAN NODDED his thanks, sauntered to the door, and entered the small, quiet taproom where dim lighting provided a sense of seclusion. He had no trouble at all spotting Margaret Smith at one of the small tables. The ex-Mrs. Charles was wearing a big black hat and a frock with a black chiffon bodice. The man she was with had straight, light brown hair that grew in a cute drake's tail at the nape of his neck. He was wearing a light gray tropic worsted suit.

Morgan approached the table, and Ashley looked up out of eyes the color of strong tea. He had a thin, straight nose, full lips, and one of those chins that don't go anywhere. He stood when

Morgan addressed him, put out a hand that proved remarkably strong. He then introduced Margaret Smith, who smiled and said how-do-you-do as though they had never met.

"I'd like a word with you in private, Mr. Morgan," Ashley said hastily as Morgan reached for an unoccupied chair. "That is, if Miss Smith will excuse us."

Morgan smiled down at the glowing oval of face, into the clear eyes that regarded him calmly. "What made you think Red Bailey was murdered?" He pushed that at her quietly just to see what she would do with it. And she didn't do anything. Her face remained perfectly composed.

"That was a slip of the tongue, Mr. Morgan."

"I see," he said and thought it must be gratifying to slip in the right direction. He wished he'd made such a slip earlier in the game. He turned to find that Ashley had led off a good ten feet from the table and now waited impatiently, his frown disapproving.

It was with the same frown that he glanced about Morgan's living room some seconds later. Maybe he didn't go for old red mahogany and the serviceable Italian tapestries in which the furniture was upholstered. At Morgan's invitation he sat down as though he had eggs in his pockets. He seemed unconscious of the chin deficiency and kept a hand over the lower part of his face while he talked.

"I've entered into something of a Galahad venture," he announced, shaking his head at the cigarettes Morgan proffered.

"All right, Sir—"

Galahad was so obviously on the tip of Morgan's tongue that Ashley gave him a penetrating look out of yellowish eyes and then returned to picking at a loose thread in the tapestry that covered the arm of the chair.

"I believe in the direct approach," he said as Morgan dumped his lean body into a chair on the opposite side of the small room. "The lady you met downstairs is being victimized by blackmailers. She has in the past committed certain—er, indiscretions, so to speak. There are letters and photographs which she is most anxious to regain. Inasmuch as she is soon to make what I believe is called 'a fortunate marriage' into one of the fine old families, these blackguards have a real club over her. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yeah, you do," Morgan said unpleasantly. "Since I hear the same story on an average of once a week, I'd probably understand if you spoke only Japanese. You want me to establish contact with these people, pay them their bloodmoney, and get back the evidence."

The thread Ashley had been working on broke with a distinct pop, and he rolled it into a tiny ball with a nervous thumb and forefinger.

"The contact has been established. I have the money with me." He reached into the inner pocket of his coat and drew out three inches of manila envelope. "I am to meet these blackmailers in—" Ashley glanced at his watch—"one hour from now at an established point along the Collings Road. Frankly, the whole thing makes

me a bit nervous. I am willing to pay you a fee to accompany me, though I have specific instructions to come alone." He spread his lips in a hopeful smile. "Though you might crouch down on the floor of the rear compartment. Do you carry a gun, by the way?"

Morgan shook his head. "I can if I have to."

"No, I'm sure it won't be necessary," Ashley said slowly. "They'd hardly attempt to kill the goose that lays the golden egg."

Morgan offered no assurance. He took a long drag on his cigarette and looked at the ceiling. He wanted a drink. He wanted the good clean taste of bourbon in his mouth. But he was not sharing good whiskey with the likes of Mr. Ashley.

"What is your fee for this sort of thing?" Ashley asked.

"You mean, what is my fee, period. The job doesn't determine the rate. Thirty-five dollars a day or any part of a day. An hour is a part of a day, and if that's too steep for you, that'll be fine because I'd a whole lot rather go to bed."

Ashley waved thirty-five dollars aside as a mere nothing and took out his wallet. The bills he extended fluttered like aspen leaves in his nervous hand.

"I'll go right down and see Miss Smith into a cab," he said as he went to the door. "If you will meet me in front of the hotel in five minutes, we'll get this over. That is—" Little pinpricks of sweat broke out on Ashley's rather flat forehead. His laugh quavered. "Well, in five minutes, then?"

Morgan nodded. As he closed the door, the phone started to ring. He crossed to the writing desk, picked up the handset. Buster Spindell's voice, plainly agitated, came from the receiver.

"Where in the hell are you, Johnny? I mean, what happened to you?"

"I'm in the hospital and I got run over by a truck," Morgan said nastily.

"Now wait, Johnny. Easy does it. I just got the idea maybe I can help you get rid of that thirty thou after all."

"You mean you know where the Charles jewels are?"

"Johnny, that's just what I mean." Buster chuckled. "Took the words right out of my mouth."

"Well, so do I," Morgan said, "and you haven't got them." He slammed the phone onto its standard, turned, went toward the bedroom. He got out of his suitcoat and went to the closet. He took down his gun in its harness.

## CHAPTER FIVE

WHEN THEY had crossed the old covered bridge and turned left on Collings Road, Ashley had told Morgan he'd better get down on the floor back there. So now he sat out of casual sight on the rough carpet, his back to the door, his lean arms lashed about flexed knees, and gave himself up to the erratic movement of Ashley's sedan which would slow almost to a stop and spurt forward again.

"What in the hell are you trying to do?" Morgan complained.

Ashley laughed uneasily. "I'm look-

ing for a mail box with the name 'Happy Hollow' printed on it."

He kept looking, and after three more slow-downs and spurts, he braked to a stop and turned off his lights. The darkness was absolute. Ashley got out. Morgan counted two steps on gravel before Ashley's feet found the soft grassy shoulder.

Morgan was to wait five minutes. If Ashley didn't return to the car by that time, Morgan was supposed to find a path that led down to a cabin on the creek bank. He was supposed to do this in very high grade darkness and in spite of an aversion to snakes that amounted almost to terror. It was a screwy setup. It went well with the Charles caper—so well that the two might have been connected by an umbilical cord.

He sat there on the floor of the car with his knees under his chin and listened to the distant gurgle of the creek, the chirp of katydids, and the serenade of an errant mosquito. He waited. He thought five minutes had passed. He waited a little longer to make sure. Then he slid his hand down inside his coat and brought out the gun.

He got over onto his knees, fumbled the door latch, turned it—and what in this gadget-ridden old world should appear but Morgan himself fully illuminated by the dome light that came on automatically when the door opened. As he got from the car he must have made a fine target for somebody waiting hard by the right rear fender, because the blow to the head was clean and quick, and he had no sensation at all of meeting the ground. . . .

"No lump."

Two, Morgan thought. I always take two in my coffee.

"Stewed, huh?"

"The hell! Come on, Morgan, quit stalling."

He was being shaken, not gently. Then slapped. He opened his eyes in the glare of an electric torch. His eyes closed again on the distinct impression that he was in a forest of trousered legs. He tried to think, to put trousered legs and the sensation of rapid rotation with the odors of dust, new-cut hay, and strong whiskey. He tried to tie all that into a package and decide where he was. On a merry-go-round in a hayfield and there was standing room only, and who had the bourbon? It was not at all reasonable.

"Who *has* the bourbon?" he asked plaintively. He opened his eyes and sat up. The dust was beneath him; it pushed up through splayed fingers of the hands that helped support him.

"You, fella. You had it, quite a lot."

Morgan looked into the round robust face of one Leon Proust of the sheriff's office, whose toothy smile always recalled the front end of a Buick.

"And conversely," Morgan said, "the front end of a Buick always reminds me of Leon Proust. What hit me, Leon?"

The county cop pulled his lips over his teeth as best he could and tried to look grim. He was moderately successful. "I'm not sure you were hit. The load you're carrying, maybe you passed out."

"I was hit," Morgan insisted. "With a head like mine you can't argue."

"With no lump you can argue. Maybe you came out of the bull-rushes into the path of that first car and pulled a phoney joe. Maybe you thought the driver would be able to identify you. Or something."

Morgan realized he *did* have the bourbon. But outside, all over his suit-coat. He reeked like a weekend about to be lost. He had a head, though, like Monday morning, and if there was no lump he supposed you could argue.

Now arms that were conceivably connected with the trousered legs hauled him to his feet. About him the dark was shot through with vagrant lights. There were cars stretching back along the side of the road. There were strange, hostile faces gaping at him.

Leon Proust patted Morgan and came up with a gun. Proust sniffed at the muzzle. His grunt was all satisfaction.

Morgan said, "Uh huh," wisely.

In front of him, along the shoulder, there was a concentration of small lights. There the dust-covered ragweed had been swirled and trampled. There white coats gleamed, the backs in them bowed over somebody.

"Ashley?" Morgan wondered.

Leon Proust said, "Ashley, he calls him. A good friend of yours, huh? First names yet?"

"Mr. Ashley, then."

Proust grunted. "Slow recovery after a fumble."

"Dead?"

"Sure, dead. Let him stand, Martin."

And Morgan stood alone, swaying. "How many, Leon?"

"One. How many more does it take in the head?" Proust was unfriendly, sore about something. About Ashley, probably. Dead, Ashley became quite a bother. Proust said, "You tell us, handsome. What were you and Quinlan doing out here?"

"Quinlan?" Morgan repeated dazedly. But it had started to hitch. Buster Spindell, Quinlan Motors.

"Ashley Quinlan. Who else did you bump tonight?"

All along the line, it had started to hitch like freight cars shunted onto a siding. Morgan licked dust off his dry lips.

"Sure, Leon, I'll tell you."

Proust nodded. "Downtown you can tell me."

**S**O DOWNTOWN it was, in the county bastile across from the police building, in a room with buff walls and a high ceiling. With Proust and a bright young man from the prosecutor's office, with a male stenographer who stood by and gouged up dandruff with the blunt end of his pencil. The only friendly face in the room was on the clock, and it said 10:08. Morgan tipped back in a chair and sent both hands after cigarettes.

"Later." Proust shook his head. "First you talk."

So he told them, beginning with Ashley Quinlan who had palmed himself off as Mr. Ashley. Then he spoke of Margaret Smith who wanted some letters back from a blackmailer. He told it as straight as he had it, and he knew what it sounded like.

"Crap," Proust described it, showing

his teeth. He seemed surprised when Morgan nodded agreement.

"But it'll check. With Benny, the night clerk. With Margaret Smith."

Proust reached lazily for the phone book. "This Margaret Smith—"

"I don't know her number," Morgan said. "But she's North Side."

Proust scowled into pages of Smiths and came up with, "Margaret A. on North Delaware?"

Morgan said it could be. He stood and stretched. His head was still thumping. The world's largest head, thumping all over. He worked his lips into a smile for Mr. Proust.

"You furnish transportation to my humble abode?" Morgan asked.

Proust grunted. "Where you bed down tonight, you can walk." He moved to the door, opened it, and bawled out to somebody, "Hey, Ollie, show Morgan the bridal suite."

So he went to the bridal suite, not without protest, and the bride on the top shelf had grizzled beard stubble, a snore like a file on tool steel, and stank of Old Stump Water. Morgan like many a man before him, shook the bars of the cage and shouted after the turnkey.

"Get me Hans Teilhet, damnit! Sergeant Teilhet."

Which neither impressed nor deterred this man Ollie. When his shadow had vanished along the corridor, Morgan went to the lower bunk and sat on the edge of it. He listened to the night sounds of the jail—the snores, the nightmare mumblings, the restless shuffle of feet pacing the short distances. He sat without moving for what

seemed at least half the night before the turnkey and Leon Proust reappeared at the cell door.

"No, don't get up," Proust said thoughtfully. He showed his teeth in a Buick smile. "I got news for you, John."

Ollie unlocked the cell and Proust came in. "This good-looker named Smith says you're a liar," Proust began pleasantly. "There are no letters, no photographs, and she isn't being blackmailed. As to her getting married to a man of means, she tried that once and was cured. She's earning her keep with her own itty bitty hands designing goofy women's hats, or goofy hats for women, whichever you prefer. Though she's known Ashley Quinlan for a long time—a friend of her ex-husband—last night was her first date with him, and never again."

"Well, that's reasonable," Morgan said calmly, "unless she goes to his funeral." He took a cigarette from the pack Proust offered, then a light. "What about Benny?"

"The night clerk?" Proust nodded. "That checks. A Mr. Ashley, Benny says, not Quinlan. Also, something you didn't think of."

"What didn't I think of?"

"The manila envelope in Ashley Quinlan's inside coat pocket." Proust dusted ash into the lavatory behind him. "Contained some pieces of newspaper."

Morgan nodded, his mouth down at the corners. "So I was had again. Now either book me or let me out of this roachtrap."

Proust was offended. "This is the

cleanest county jail in the state of Indiana. And we'll book you for drunk and disorderly, if we have to. Or you can tell us the truth."

Morgan said, "I'll talk to Teilhet. I'll talk to no damned county cop with a face like the front end of a Buick."

Proust smiled his smile and went back to the grilled door. "Then we'll book you, John. Nightie-night."

Morning was eightish, a gray morning with Proust back and with him Hans Teilhet. Old Hans, the good gray monk of Safe-and-Left, his face sober, with a chuckle unborn and kicking back of his belly.

"Oh, but it's funny," Morgan said acidly. He stood without caution and bumped his fine large head on the bunk above and cursed horribly. Old Stump Water snored on peacefully, and Morgan wondered if the sot had taken the top berth to avoid snakes.

Teilhet said, "I heard you'd found lodgings over here for the night."

Morgan stepped into his oxfords and went out into the corridor with his laces flopping.

"Sober, are you?" Proust asked considerately.

"Nuts! Ask Teilhet."

Teilhet nodded. "You were bopped, all right. They found what you were bopped with."

"Tell Proust," Morgan said. "I know I was bopped."

"With a woman's stocking," Teilhet said.

"Oh?" Proust opened the door of the tall room with the buff walls. He waved them into it. "What was in the stocking? Not the usual thing."

"A block of yellow laundry soap," Teilhet explained. "They found it in the stocking in the weeds along Collings Road. Hence, no lump. But two dents in the soap. Twice he was bopped."

Morgan said, "The hell. Once was enough." He folded down onto a chair, stooped to tie his shoelaces.

"Two dents anyway," Teilhet said.

One for me, Morgan thought, and one for Albert. Albert, too, had been bopped lumpless. He said, "Get bloodhounds and *cherchez la femme*." He straightened, his face flushed, his head spinning.

Teilhet said, "No femme ever wore these. Nothing but laundry soap."

"These?" Proust asked. "You found the mate to the stocking?"

"New and unused," Teilhet replied, nodding his gray head. "In Ashley Quinlan's bachelor apartment. Now," he turned to Morgan, "why would Quinlan want you dead?"

IT WAS very keen of old Hans, Morgan thought. He said, "Because I knew Quinlan had the Charles jewels." It was not even a guess. It was something to cast in Proust's direction, and if Proust sank his teeth in it he'd be occupied for a while.

Teilhet asked, "Brown hair, yellowish eyes, no chin?"

"Ashley Quinlan to a T."

Teilhet looked pleased. "We got that description from Chicago where they found the Charles jewels in a pawn shop."

"Wait." That was Proust proving difficult. He frowned at Morgan. "Ash-

ley wanted you killed?" he queried.

"Uh huh. He bopped me, soaked me in whiskey. And if I was found on the bank of the creek with my face in the water, who was to say I hadn't gone on a tear and fallen into the drink? Hence the lumpless bop, do you see?"

"What was this song-and-dance about Margaret Smith and some letters?"

Morgan said, "You named it—song-and-dance. Quinlan brought in the woman as window dressing to make the blackmail story sound convincing. I thought at the time I was walking into something, but I zipped when I should have zagged."

Proust wondered, "What would a successful dealer in cars want with the Charles jewels? And who killed Quinlan if you didn't?"

Morgan shrugged. "That's not my worry, lucky me." He stood and glanced from Proust to the door. Proust hesitated only a moment.

"You sign a receipt for your pocket trinkets, John, and you can go." He added an unpleasant note, "For now."

Morgan sighed, picked up his stuff, and left the jail with Hans Teilhet. They stood for a moment on the sidewalk on the west side of Alabama Street, and Morgan said thanks.

"I told you Buster Spindell didn't swipe the Charles jewels, didn't I?" Teilhet reminded Morgan.

"Did I say that he did?" Morgan's eyes were very black, very shiny. "Now you've got Red Bailey and Ashley Quinlan, both of them dead. And you still haven't got anybody who can open a safe by the punch method." He

nodded so-long to Hans Teilhet and sauntered off up the street.

Morgan picked up a cab on East Washington Street, told the driver to go out North Meridian to Quinlan Motors. He lighted a cigarette, settled back, and thought that now, finally, he was going to talk to Janie. He wondered if she was at all like the girl he had imagined she was. Probably not. Probably no girl was. You get to dreaming, alone in the dark, just you and a cigarette and the thin dregs in your glass. For that reason he rather dreaded a meeting with Janie.

That was one of the reasons.

The cab braked suddenly, boosting Morgan forward from the cushions. He looked out at Quinlan's polished glass front. He paid off the hack, got out, and then he saw Janie again. Just a glimpse of her as she ran toward the bus stop lugging a suitcase and holding a blue hat on the back of her head. He shouted at her, started to run. But the bus was there, and he noticed in that instant before the pneumatic doors swallowed her, the hurt look about her sweet mouth, as though she were choking back tears.

He stopped running, watched the bus roll out into traffic. Then he turned back and entered Quinlan's salesroom.

Three personality boys were huddled in front of a nifty sports job, maybe talking about the sudden demise of the boss. Morgan approached the group briskly with the name of Buster Spindell on his lips.

"Not here."

"Didn't come in this morning."

"Anything I can do for you, sir?"

The personality boys in a chorus, but Morgan had already turned back to the door. Now out on the sidewalk, he dropped his cigarette into the gutter, took his life in his hands as he jaywalked Meridian to get to the U-Drive-It garage. There he picked up a rental, drove north to 34th Street and across to park in front of the tavern where he had parked on the night before. He crossed to the drugstore building, went up the steps two at a time into a dingy hall where he peered at cards on doors until he found Buster Spindell's. He knocked. The door was immediately opened by Hans Teilhet looking haggard and gray.

"A meeting of great minds—" Morgan began, but his eyes followed the wave of Teilhet's puffy hand.

There was Buster Spindell. On the rug. Wearing pajama bottoms. Also wearing the horn handle of a knife right of the sternum and between, say, the fifth and sixth ribs. He had been dead some time.

Morgan stepped over the threshold, got his eyes off Buster Spindell, spotted the phone. Morgan elbowed Teilhet and pointed.

"Janie."

"What?"

"Miss Williams. Hop to it, Hans. I saw her with a suitcase heading downtown on a bus. Going bye-bye in a hurry."

Teilhet tramped heavily to the phone. While he was dialing, Morgan took a deep breath that brought the lingering fragrance of flowers to his nostrils. Perfume. Something light, not too cloying. He was no good on perfume.

"Radio dispatcher," Teilhet said into the phone, looking sadly at Morgan. In the brief interval of waiting, the old man said, "You stay out of murder, John. Do you hear?"

"Oh, sure," Morgan said. But it was hard to stay out after you'd once been dragged in, first as a corpse that didn't quite make the grade, and then as a fall guy.

THE POLICE picked up Janie within five minutes after Teilhet's call. They caught her at the Union Bus Terminal as she was buying a ticket for Rising Sun, Indiana, where her parents lived. Morgan got her story third-handedly from Teilhet who, in turn, had talked with somebody on Homicide.

Janie and Buster had quarreled the previous evening. It seemed there was a roll of bills—a much larger roll than Buster ought to have had. Janie had asked questions. The alibi she had provided him, on the Charles caper, was a lie. But she had lied gladly, believing in him until she caught sight of this roll he was carrying. She had then accused him of deceiving her, of having a hand in the Charles job. That had led to the quarrel. This morning she had decided to quit her job and go home to Rising Sun, Indiana.

But there were other things. There was Janie's perfume lingering around Buster's room. Her favorite scent. There was the knife from her kitchen, and while she explained he had borrowed it to cut a cake she had made for him, that, Homicide thought, sounded rather pat.

It did not look well for Janie. Teil-

het, heavy-hearted, thought that it didn't look well at all.

Morgan left police headquarters and walked toward Washington Street. He tried not to think about Janie threading her lonely way across no-man's land mined with all the booby traps the Homicide boys could devise. He stepped into the first drugstore he came to, went back to the phone booth, and called the Charles residence. After the usual to-do with the butler, Morgan got Charlotte Charles on the wire.

"Still scared, honey?" he asked her.

"Honey, I am. I need a good detective bad, honey." She had been at the gin already this morning. You could almost smell sloe berries through the telephone.

"This evening?" he suggested.

"Uh huh." Charlotte, very agreeable. "But not here, Johnny. Anywhere you say, but not here."

"How about my place?" he wondered. "The Marion. Suite four-twelve, say eightish."

"Eightish."

He said, "You'd better repeat that address. I'd hate to have you wandering around looking. Especially looking the way that you look."

Her purring laugh. "Sweet boy! The Marion. Suite four-twelve."

"Roger." He hung up. He was certain now that Charlotte didn't know that the Charles house was wired for sound.

After that he haunted the second-hand record shops until he found a disk of *Paper Doll*. Then he took a taxi out to Guy Nash's bungalow because he needed to borrow a gun; his own

was still at the sheriff's office for obvious reasons.

He found Guy in the back yard raking crabgrass out of his lawn. He was a tall gaunt man in his sixties with a deeply lined face and disillusioned blue eyes. He leaned on his rake and explained that he'd been downtown that morning trying to persuade Dr. Charles' office nurse to let him have a peek at Buster Spindell's medical record.

"No soap, huh?" Morgan said.

"Not a chip. Then I tried the general practitioner who sent Buster to Dr. Charles, and no soap there either. They got ethics, these medics. Just like you and me," and Guy winked.

"You've established Buster as a regular patient, though. That's something. And I know one thing that was wrong with him physically."

"What's that?" Guy Nash wondered.

"Dextrocardia."

It meant nothing to Guy. "Do you die of it?"

"Not generally. But Buster managed to." Morgan looked toward the back door of the little white house where Mrs. Guy Nash was calling them both into lunch. And it suddenly occurred to Morgan just how hungry he was.

It was three o'clock before Morgan got back to his apartment-hotel with the borrowed gun in his under-arm sling. He picked up his mail at the desk, and among other things was a six-by-eight envelope labeled *Photographs—Do Not Fold*.

In his rooms, he put the second-hand disk of *Paper Doll* down on radio-phonograph console, dumped his

mail on the writing desk, took off his coat and the gun harness. Then he called Teilhet to find out if there was anything new on Janie. There wasn't. They still had her.

Morgan hung up, sat down at the desk, and opened the six-by-eight envelope. It contained a cardboard stiffener, a glossy print of a girl to which had been clipped a piece of note paper. On the paper was written in pencil:

*Believe me, this Patty*

*Bryce is not dead!*

*McGowan*

Morgan smiled slightly. Great sense of humor, this McGowan. He then raised the note paper for a glimpse of this blonde. There was much to be seen of her, for she was clad in her tissue paper costume, including the paper panties. She had a cute dimple in her chin and great, dark-shadowed eyes.

The autograph read: *Very sincerely yours, Patty Bryce, The Paper Doll.* Which was sweet of her, Morgan thought. Especially since he'd never seen this babe anywhere before in his life.

## CHAPTER SIX

**S**HE KNOCKED at his door at 7:50 p.m. He opened the door, stepped back, rubbed the back of his neck, and said, "Well, well, well. Fooled me again."

"Again?"

"Well, never mind." It was the wrong Mrs. Charles. The ex, known now as Margaret Smith. She was wearing lime green. Very cool. Cold even, when worn with that expression of so-slight annoyance.

She came in, and he bowed her to a chair which she sat on as though she would not stay very long.

"A drink?" he suggested, starting toward the liquor cabinet which he had freshly stocked with sloe gin for Charlotte.

"No thank you." She looked up at him through harlequin glasses and out of aquamarine eyes, and she asked, "Whatever possessed you to tell the police Mr. Quinlan had hired you to recover letters of mine from a blackmailler?"

"That's what Quinlan hired me for," he said simply. "He was lying, of course. Have a cigarette?"

"Thank you, no." She was furious. Beautifully furious. And she wanted nothing of him except maybe his head on a platter.

"Let's not bicker among ourselves, Miss Smith," he said. "Let's bicker with Ashley Quinlan since he can't defend himself. What reason did he give you for wanting to see me?"

"Business. I presumed it was a car deal. While the man meant absolutely nothing to me, I was rather put out that he would interrupt our evening together for a stupid business transaction."

Morgan sat down opposite her. She had wonderful legs. He smiled at her. "Let's put it this way. I'll believe you if you believe me. And if I ever take you to dinner, I'll drink to thee only with mine eyes."

She accepted that as her due with a very small smile. "Why would Ashley Quinlan lie to us both?"

"He needed you as window dressing

to make his story of blackmail ring true. He needed an excuse to get me out on a lonely road so he could kill me."

"Kill you?"

"Uh huh. Because I know too much about the Paper Doll." He watched curiosity erase every affectation of boredom on her beautiful face. So he told her about Patty Bryce and her strip act and saw Margaret Smith take on a strangely ecstatic smile.

"Love light of the late Mr. Bailey," she said musingly. "That's rather precious." Her laugh had a Borgia lilt in it.

"Now," he said. He extended long legs comfortably and tipped cigarette ash into a crystal tray on the red mahogany table beside him. "Now, once more: why did you go to Red Bailey's?"

She crossed her knees with a seductive hiss of nylon and looked away from him. "I had met Charlotte Charles only once, but I have always wondered about her background, or utter lack of it. When this thing occurred, I began casting about wildly for something that might substantiate my woman's intuition." Her pale eyes returned to Morgan. "If Charlotte *should* turn out to be this Patty Bryce, this—uh, entertainer who had so fascinated Mr. Bailey—it would be a source of endless amusement to me. The dear Dr. Charles so prides himself on his discernment."

Maybe he was feeling charitable, but Morgan was inclined to accept that. He asked, "Whom did you phone from Bailey's room?"

"Oh, that." That was a mere nothing

and Margaret Smith cast it aside in a fluttering gesture. "There was a phone number scratched on the table top, and I called it experimentally. Some woman answered with, 'Quinlan Motors. Miss Williams speaking.'"

Janie again, always around. But that got you nowhere. Bailey had been bothering Buster Spindell who had worked for Quinlan.

"Were there microphones hidden about the Charles house when you lived there?" Morgan asked.

She nodded, watching her fingers toy with the clasp of her purse. He thought her eyes were turned in upon herself in unpleasant retrospection. "Charles is a damnable person to live with. It's like being in jail. And that impossible Albert—"

"The tattle-tale."

"Exactly." She looked up, brightening.

"How did you find out about the microphones?" Morgan asked, his eyes glinting with amusement. "Don't answer that if you'd rather not."

"If I told you I found one while looking under the living room sofa to see how well the maid had dusted—" She was watching his face curiously for traces of incredulity. Not finding anything of the sort nor yet any clear cut indication of belief, she laughed without embarrassment. "I think I'd rather let you guess, Mr. Morgan."

"That'll be fun." His dark eyes on her, intently guessing, brought a faint flush to her cheeks. And then there was a quiet tap on his door. Charlotte, he thought and stood quickly, his finger on his lips. He crossed to Margaret.

"Charlotte," he whispered. "Go into the bedroom, if you're still curious."

Margaret stood as he moved toward the foyer. She tiptoed to the bedroom. He gave her time to get out of sight before he opened the corridor door. Charlotte was there in a trim little suit of spice brown and no hat. She pouted up at him.

"Took you a while, Johnny," she said and then tipped toward him. The pout was still there and he kissed it hello and held both of her elbows in his hands. She pushed against his chest with her purse and looked into his face with those nothing-surprises-me eyes. "My nice private policeman," she said softly. "Now I feel safe."

"An insult, if I ever heard one," he said. They both laughed, and she went gaily to the sofa to sit down on the cushion beneath which Morgan had hidden Guy Nash's gun. That was ungood but could probably be remedied.

"A drink?" he suggested.

"But yes." She was stripping off gloves. "Whatever you're having, Johnny. I feel awfully congenial tonight."

**H**E SLIPPED ice cubes into Old-Fashioned glasses, fished in the cabinet for the bourbon, put down the bottle, and went to the record player. "Soft lights and sweet music," he explained as he pressed a button.

"And a drink, Johnny," she reminded him. "I'm too old to suck ice cubes."

He laughed, went back to the liquor cabinet, and eased bourbon into the glasses as the phonograph began to play a piano recording of *Bewitched*,

*Bothered, and Bewildered.* He took the glasses to the sofa, handed one to Charlotte.

"Uhm, Johnny, that looks good."

"It's what the doctor ordered." He stood in front of her and slightly to her right. "Move over, will you, kitten? I've an old saber wound on my right side."

She moved quickly, without fuss. "Anything you say, Johnny. What's that word again?"

"Congenial." He sat down over the gun. He could readily reach it with his right hand in case they had visitors. And he thought they might have. His latch string was literally out. Charlotte fitted herself cozily into the crook of his left arm and they sipped their bourbon.

"What's Charlie Charlie doing tonight?" he asked without too much interest.

"The hospital." She rolled her eyes. "So he says." She lowered the level of her glass to the halfway mark. "Johnny, what do you think? The Deadly Double has a girl."

"No!" That he could not believe.

She nodded her moppet's head vigorously. "But yes. He came home last night simply reeking of perfume. Do you believe in sauce for the goose?"

"Uh huh." With half an ear on a deft passage from *Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered*.

"Good," she said. "You're congenial too, Johnny. That damn Albert. Last night he let the air out of my tires and did something to the phone." She tipped forward to put her glass on the coffee table and, leaning back again, she turned smoothly to come into his

arms, facing him, her green eyes half closed. "Kiss me, Johnny," she whispered.

He was doing that when *Paper Doll* came up on the record player. She broke away, clear away to the other end of the sofa in a neat quick bound and sat rigidly, panting, her eyes on him, narrow and bright.

"You—dirty—heel," she breathed. "You've known all along, haven't you?"

"Well—" Morgan was not altogether pleased with himself—"there were indications."

"Such as?"

"You mugged for the news photographer. A pretty woman wouldn't unless maybe she didn't want to be recognized."

"And?"

"You called Bailey an Irishman. Bailey is a Welsh name, but his mother was Irish. So you'd known him before. A photograph of Patty Bryce that I got through the mail today was slightly confusing until I remembered that small-time entertainers sometimes sell their stage names along with their acts. And—well, something had to be done." He drank what was left of his drink, needing it. "Because this is murder."

She threw back her head and laughed at him. "You think you can prove that?"

He put his glass down beside hers. "I can draw a pretty good blueprint. I don't know how you foisted Dr. Charles into marrying you, but it's a cinch you met in Chicago and he didn't have the slightest notion you were an ex-stripper."

"I met him at a convention," she said. "He was being very conventional and so was I. What's that got to do with it?"

"Let's start with Buster Spindell, Bailey's pal," Morgan said, drawing the blueprint. "Buster was on parole. A girl named Janie Williams was trying to make something out of him. He needed medical attention, so Janie sent him to a general practitioner who, in turn, sent him to Dr. Charles. During one of Buster's calls at Dr. Charles' office, you came in to pick up some spending money, or something. Buster saw you and recognized you as the babe who used to strip at the Cocoanut Club."

She said, "Buster stood up at our wedding."

"You were married to Bailey?" He hadn't known that. He watched her kick at the leg of the coffee table with the toe of a brown pump. Her face was sullen, and she didn't reply.

"Anyway," he went on, "after the usual sounding-out process, Buster started to blackmail you. But Dr. Charles is the money bags, making it tough. So you went to Ashley Quinlan for help. Ashley put up the black money in exchange for—shall we say a sweet glance and a kind word?"

"You're doing the talking," she said.

"When Buster became more and more demanding, you and Ashley worked out a plan to get rid of Buster. Buster, not Bailey—who hadn't come into the picture at that time. You were going to kill Buster Spindell and get by with it. You must have told Buster that in order to meet his demands you'd have to sell your jewels, and to do that

without exciting Dr. Charles' suspicions you'd have to set the stage as a robbery. Buster's part was to break open the safe, Ashley Quinlan's to dispose of the jewels. No risk for Buster at all, so you must have explained. No risk, except that you were going to kill him."

Morgan broke off as Charlotte picked up her glass, stood, and swayed to the liquor cabinet for a reload.

"Go on," she said, her back to him. "You're very clever, I'm sure."

"You picked night before last," he said, "because Dr. Charles would be in Chicago and you could arrange for all the servants to be out except Albert, the watchdog. Ashley Quinlan took care of Albert with a lump of soap in a stocking, then tied Albert with the tow-line. As soon as Buster had the safe open, you were going to shoot him, then call the police. But there was a slip up."

She came back to the sofa and seemed to be having a little trouble keeping the bourbon in the glass. "That damned red mick," she said.

Morgan nodded. "Bailey had been bothering Buster. He trailed Buster that night, right into the Charles house. He got there before the safe was open, maybe while Buster was getting the necessary tools out of the garage. Faced with Bailey, you got excited and emptied the gun in him."

"A hell of a mess," she said thickly. She took a quick swallow of bourbon and looked at Morgan with tears in her eyes. "All my eggs in one basket."

"Uh huh. None left for Buster. Now you had Buster like a millstone about your neck. Up to that time he'd been getting what he could from Ashley

Quinlan, through you, including the job you got Ashley to give Buster at the garage. But this was murder and Buster knew it. Let it get out that you'd married Bailey, and it was murder in any language. Still, to save you for his own purposes, Buster went through with cracking the safe, and Ashley, for the same reason, flew the jewels to Chicago. Things began to get complicated for you."

"Things did," she admitted.

"Buster thought this was his chance at the big money—a chunk out of Dr. Charles' fat bank account which the Deadly Double would be willing to pay to keep his wife out of criminal court on a murder charge. But Buster was scared, too. He knew you and Ashley Quinlan were capable of murder. He wanted protection until he could collect from Dr. Charles. So, while fixing an alibi for himself with the police, he also acted suspicious enough around me so that I'd put an operative on him. Furnish a bodyguard for free until he got that piece of big dough from the doctor."

The record player had worked its way down to *Some Enchanted Evening*. It was enchanted, all right. Even haunted. He stared at Charlotte Charles' sullen profile. He thought of Margaret Smith in the bedroom, taking this all in with that ecstatic smile on her beautiful face. There was, he recalled, an old Cuban street song that Dr. Charles had probably never heard: "If you want to lead a happy life, take an ugly woman for your wife . . ."

"But I spoiled everything," he said. "You did." She didn't look at him.

"For everybody. Accidentally. When you jerked those tissue panties out of my pocket, you thought I was on the trail of the Paper Doll. And I wasn't."

**S**HE GAVE him a quick searching look and then dipped her mouth to the bourbon.

"You decided that you and Ashley Quinlan would have to get rid of me before you had another mouth to feed. Yesterday, after you thought Dr. Charles had gone to the hospital, you called Quinlan. He came to the house, and the two of you laid plans to get me out onto Collings Road to kill me. Quinlan was to get me out there, bop me lumpless, douse me with whiskey. Then you were supposed to come along, and the two of you would drag me to the creek bank, stick my head in the water, and let nature take its course."

"I wish to God we'd managed it," she said calmly, sipping his bourbon.

"What you don't know, apparently," he went on, "is that Dr. Charles didn't go to the hospital. He sent Albert barreling out of the drive in the business coupe, just to trick you. Dr. Charles remained in the chauffeur's quarters, a jealous husband spying on his so attractive wife. And eavesdropping, too."

She stared at him. Morgan said, "You didn't know about the concealed microphones and the ever-listening ear."

She shook her head.

"Sure," he said. "That's why Albert wouldn't let you go out last night to meet Ashley Quinlan on Collings Road."

"But—" she moistened her lips—"somebody did."

"Somebody certainly did. Charlie Charlie, with your plans in his head and hell in his heart. The jealous husband. He met Ashley Quinlan and they quarreled over my gun and Charlie Charlie shot Ashley and left me for the fall guy."

Charlotte scooted along the sofa toward him. "Now I *am* scared!"

"After Ashley, there was Buster. Buster was expecting Charlie Charlie to come along with the balance of the lump payment for silence on the killing of Red Bailey. And Charlie Charlie put a knife into Buster. Just once. Remember what I said about killing a snake? Just one jab with the knife, but in exactly the right place, to the *right* of the sternum, or breastbone."

She frowned. "But that's wrong."

"It's right if you've got dextrocardia, and only his doctor would know Buster had it. That meant the position of his heart was exactly the reverse of the position of most people's hearts."

Morgan broke it off there because his unlocked door had opened. There was a neat little shadow in the foyer and the dull flash of gun steel. Charlotte screamed and flung herself on Morgan in a frantic, unreasoned move that had to do with her own protection. Morgan dumped her on the floor, and she rolled. He reared back on the sofa, reached between his knees for Guy Nash's gun.

Dr. Charles' first shot was wild but not so wild but what Morgan felt the breeze from it along his left cheek. Morgan shot without aiming, and his bullet seemed to have gone up Dr. Charles' right coat sleeve. Very hot. Very penetrating. Also, very lucky.

And the doctor stood like a little gray rock, his lipless mouth open, and tried to switch the gun to his left hand. But Morgan was on him then with a chopping blow that cut the gun out of Charlie Charlie's hand. Then Morgan gun-whipped Charlie Charlie across the side of the head, and all of the taut drawn wires seemed to snap at once.

Charlotte Charles was back on the sofa, her legs coiled up under her, pressing back as though she could shrivel herself into the upholstery and never be noticed. But she would always be noticed, with that face and that figure. And Margaret Smith came out of the bedroom, smiling very coldly.

Morgan went to the phone. Presently, they were all riding downtown with some official escorts. As soon as Charlie Charlie could talk, he did.

Hans Teilhet had something to contribute on the subject of perfume. It seemed Teilhet had checked with the drugstore on 34th Street. The clerk said that Buster had bought a peace offering for his girl. For Janie. Her favorite scent in perfume. The package must have been there in Buster's room when Charlie Charlie had called to do murder, and he had sprinkled it about as a red herring.

So Janie was free.

Morgan didn't see her that night, nor until several weeks later. Then she was along Meridian Street's automobile row again, working somewhere. He caught a glimpse of her, and the hurt look was still around her sweet mouth.

He intended to do something about her sometime. Maybe tomorrow.

Or should you shatter a dream? ♦♦♦

*To those misguided souls who claim that women cannot write mystery stories, the two words, Agatha Christie, provide a perfect squelch. Few detective writers today, male or female, would dare challenge this gentle Englishwoman's supremacy. From Sussex to Singapore, her Hercules Poirot is almost as synonymous with detective prowess as Mr. Sherlock Holmes himself. Here, using the gifts that have made her famous, the master tells the haunting story of a girl so exquisitely beautiful that she must make murder wherever she goes.*



## The Face of Helen

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

MR. SATTERTHWAITE sat alone at the opera in his big box on the first tier. Outside the door was a printed card bearing his name. An appreciator and connoisseur of all the arts, Mr. Satterthwaite was especially fond of good music, and was a regular subscriber to Convent Garden every year, reserving a box for Tuesdays and Fridays throughout the season.

But it was not often that he sat in it alone. He was a gregarious little

gentleman, and he liked filling his box with the elite of the great world to which he belonged, and also with the aristocracy of the artistic world in which he was equally at home. He was alone tonight because a countess had disappointed him.

The countess, besides being a beautiful and celebrated woman, was also a good mother. Her children had been attacked by that common and distressing disease, the mumps, and the

countess remained at home in tearful confabulation with exquisitely starched nurses. Her husband, glad of the chance, had begged off also.

So Mr. Satterthwaite sat alone. *Cavalieria Rusticana* and *Pagliacci* were being given that night, and since the first had never appealed to him, he arrived just after the curtain went down on Santuzza's death agony in time to glance round the house with a practiced eye, before every one streamed out.

Mr. Satterthwaite adjusted his opera glasses, looked around the house; marked down his prey and sallied forth with a well mapped plan of campaign ahead of him. A plan, however, which he did not put into execution, for just outside his box he cannoned into a tall, dark man and recognized him with a pleasurable thrill of excitement.

"Mr. Quin!" cried Mr. Satterthwaite.

He seized his friend warmly by the hand.

"You must share my box," said Mr. Satterthwaite determinedly. "You are not with a party?"

"No, I am sitting by myself in the stalls," responded Mr. Quin with a smile.

"Then that is settled," said Mr. Satterthwaite with a sigh of relief.

They went back to the box at the first summons of the bell, and leaning over the front of it, they watched the people returning to the stalls.

"That's a beautiful head," observed Mr. Satterthwaite suddenly.

He indicated with his glasses a spot immediately beneath them in the stalls circle. A girl sat there whose face they could not see—only the pure gold of her

hair that fitted with the closeness of a cap till it merged into the white neck.

"A Greek head," said Mr. Satterthwaite reverently. "Pure Greek." He sighed happily. "It's a remarkable thing when you come to think of it—how very few people have hair that fits them."

"You are so observant," said Mr. Quin.

"I see things," admitted Mr. Satterthwaite. "I do see things. For instance, I picked out that head at once. We must have a look at her face sooner or later. But it won't match, I'm sure. That would be a chance in a thousand."

**A**LMOST as the words left his lips, the lights flickered and went down, the sharp rap of the conductor's baton was heard, and the opera began. A new tenor, Yoaschbim, said to be a second Caruso, was singing that night.

He had been referred to by the newspapers as a Yugoslav, a Czech, an Albanian, a Magyar, and a Bulgarian, with a beautiful impartiality. He had given an extraordinary concert at the Albert Hall, a program of the folk songs of his native hills with a specially tuned orchestra. It was quite a relief to some people to find this evening that Yoaschbim could sing in ordinary Italian with all the traditional sobs and quivers.

The curtain went down on the first act and applause burst out vociferously. Mr. Satterthwaite turned to Mr. Quin. He realized that the latter was waiting for him to pronounce judgment, and plumed himself a little.

Very slowly he nodded his head.

"It is the real thing," he said.

"You think so?"

"As fine a voice as Caruso's. People will not recognize that it is so at first, for his technique is not yet perfect. There are ragged edges, a lack of certainty in the attack. But the voice is there—magnificent."

"I went to his concert at the Albert Hall," said Mr. Quin.

"Did you? I could not go."

"He made a wonderful hit with the *Shepherd's Song*."

"I read about it," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "The refrain ends each time with a high note—a kind of cry. A note midway between A and B flat. Very curious."

Yoaschbim had taken three calls, bowing and smiling. The lights went up, and the people began to file out. Mr. Satterthwaite leaned over to watch the girl with the golden head. She rose, adjusted her scarf, and turned.

Mr. Satterthwaite caught his breath. There were, he knew, such faces in the world—faces that made history. . . .

The girl moved to the gangway, her companion, a young man, beside her. And Mr. Satterthwaite noticed how every man in the vicinity looked, and continued to look covertly.

"Beauty!" said Mr. Satterthwaite to himself. "There is such a thing. Not charm, nor attraction, nor magnetism, nor any of the things we talk about so glibly—just sheer beauty. The shape of a face, the line of an eyebrow, the curve of a jaw." He quoted softly under his breath: "*The face that launched a thousand ships*." And for the first time he realized the meaning of those words.

He glanced across at Mr. Quin, who was watching him in what seemed such perfect comprehension that Mr. Satterthwaite felt there was no need of words.

"I've always wondered," he said simply, "what such women were really like."

"You mean?"

"The Helens, the Cleopatras, the Mary Stuarts."

Mr. Quin nodded thoughtfully.

"If we go out," he suggested, "we may see."

They went out together, and their quest was successful.

THE PAIR they were in search of were seated on a lounge halfway up the staircase. For the first time, Mr. Satterthwaite noted the girl's companion, a dark young man, not handsome, but with a suggestion of restless fire about him. A face full of strange angles; jutting cheek bones, a forceful slightly crooked jaw, deep-set eyes that were curiously light under the dark overhanging brows.

"An interesting face," said Mr. Satterthwaite to himself. "A real face. It means something."

The young man was leaning forward talking earnestly. The girl was listening. Neither of them belonged to Mr. Satterthwaite's world. He took them to be of the "arty" class. The girl wore a rather shapeless garment of cheap white satin. The young man wore his evening clothes with an air of being uncomfortable in them.

The two men passed and repassed several times. The fourth time they did so, the couple had been joined by a

third—a fair young man with a suggestion of the clerk about him. With his coming a certain tension had set in. The newcomer was fidgeting with his tie and seemed ill at ease, the girl's beautiful face was turned gravely up toward him, and her companion was scowling furiously.

"The usual story," said Mr. Quin very softly as they passed.

"Yes," said Mr. Satterthwaite with a sigh. "It's inevitable, I suppose. The snarling of two dogs over a bone. It always has been, it always will be. And yet, one could wish for something different. Beauty—" He stopped. Beauty, to Mr. Satterthwaite, meant something very wonderful. He found it difficult to speak of it. He looked at Mr. Quin, who nodded his head gravely in understanding.

They went back to their seats for the second act.

At the close of the performance, Mr. Satterthwaite turned eagerly to his friend:

"It is a wet night. My car is here. You must allow me to drive you—er—somewhere."

The last word was Mr. Satterthwaite's delicacy coming into play. "To drive you home," would, he felt, have savored of curiosity. Mr. Quin had always been singularly reticent. It was extraordinary how little Mr. Satterthwaite knew about him.

Mr. Quin shook his head.

"You are most kind," he said, "but I prefer to go my own way. Besides," he added, with a rather curious smile, "if anything should—happen, it will be for you to act. Good night, and thank you.

Once again we have seen the drama together."

He had gone so quickly that Mr. Satterthwaite had no time to protest, but he was left with a faint uneasiness stirring in his mind. To what drama did Mr. Quin refer? *Pagliacci*, or another?

Masters, Mr. Satterthwaite's chauffeur, was in the habit of waiting in a side street. His master disliked the long delay while the cars drew up in turn before the opera house. Now, as on previous occasions, he walked rapidly round the corner and along the street toward where he knew he should find Masters awaiting him. Just in front of him were a girl and a man, and even as he recognized them another man joined them.

**I**T ALL BROKE out in a minute. A man's voice, angrily uplifted. Another man's voice in injured protest. And then the scuffle. Blows, angry breathing, more blows, the form of a policeman appearing majestically from nowhere—and in another minute Mr. Satterthwaite was beside the girl where she shrank back.

"Allow me," he said. "You must not stay here."

He took her by the arm and marshaled her swiftly down the street. Once she looked back.

"Oughtn't I—" she began uncertainly. Mr. Satterthwaite shook his head.

"It would be very unpleasant for you to be mixed up in it. You would probably be asked to go along to the police station with them. I am sure neither of your—friends would wish that."

He stopped.

"This is my car. If you will allow me to do so, I shall have much pleasure in driving you home."

The girl looked at him searchingly. The staid respectability of Mr. Satterthwaite impressed her favorably. She bent her head.

"Thank you," she said, and got into the car, the door of which Masters was holding open.

In reply to a question from Mr. Satterthwaite, she gave him an address in Chelsea, and he got in beside her.

The girl was upset and not in the mood for talking, and Mr. Satterthwaite was too tactful to intrude upon her thoughts. Presently, however, she turned to him and spoke of her own accord.

"I wish," she said pettishly, "people wouldn't be so silly."

"It is a nuisance," agreed Mr. Satterthwaite.

His matter-of-fact manner put her at her ease, and she went on as though feeling the need of confiding in some one.

"It wasn't as though—I mean, well, it was like this. Mr. Eastney and I have been friends for a long time, ever since I came to London. He's taken no end of trouble about my voice, and got some very good introductions, and he's been more kind to me than I can say.

"He's absolutely music mad. It was very good of him to take me tonight. I'm sure he can't really afford it. And then Mr. Burns came up and spoke to us—quite nicely, I'm sure, and Phil—Mr. Eastney—got sulky about it.

"I don't know why he should. It's a free country, I'm sure. And Mr. Burns

is always pleasant and good tempered. Then, just as we were walking to the tube, he came up and joined us, and he hadn't so much as said two words before Philip flew out at him like a madman. And—oh! I don't like it."

"Don't you?" asked Mr. Satterthwaite very softly.

She blushed but very little. There was none of the conscious siren about her. A certain measure of pleasurable excitement in being fought for there must be—that was only nature—but Mr. Satterthwaite decided that a worried perplexity lay uppermost, and he had the clue to it in another moment when she observed inconsequently:

"I hope he hasn't hurt him."

*Now which is "him"?* thought Mr. Satterthwaite, smiling to himself in the darkness.

He backed his own judgment and said:

"You hope Mr.—er—Eastney hasn't hurt Mr. Burns?"

She nodded.

"Yes, that's what I said. It seems so dreadful. I wish I knew."

The car was drawing up.

"Have you a telephone?" he asked.

"Yes."

"If you like, I will find out exactly what has happened and then telephone to you."

The girl's face brightened.

"Oh, that would be very kind of you! Are you sure it's not too much bother?"

"Not in the least."

She thanked him again and gave him her telephone number, adding with a touch of shyness.

"My name is Gillian West."

As he was driven through the night, bound on his errand, a curious smile came to Mr. Satterthwaite's lips.

He thought: So that is all it is—the shape of a face, the curve of a jaw!

But he fulfilled his promise. . . .

THE FOLLOWING Sunday afternoon Mr. Satterthwaite went to Kew Gardens to admire the rhododendrons. Very long ago—incredibly long ago, it seemed to Mr. Satterthwaite—he had driven down to Kew Gardens with a certain young lady to see the bluebells.

Mr. Satterthwaite had arranged very carefully beforehand in his own mind exactly what he was going to say, and the precise words he would use in asking the young lady for her hand in marriage. He was just conning them over in his mind, and responding to her raptures about the bluebells a little absent-mindedly, when the shock came.

The young lady stopped exclaiming at the bluebells and suddenly confided in Mr. Satterthwaite—as a true friend—her love for another. Mr. Satterthwaite put away the little set speech he had prepared, and hastily rummaged for sympathy and friendship in the bottom drawer of his mind.

Such was Mr. Satterthwaite's romance—a rather tepid Victorian one, but it had left him with a romantic attachment to Kew Gardens, and he would often go there to see the bluebells, or, if he had been abroad later than usual, the rhododendrons, and would sigh to himself, and feel rather sentimental, and really enjoy himself very much indeed in an old-fashioned way.

This particular afternoon he was

strolling back past the tea houses when he recognized a couple sitting at one of the small tables on the grass. They were Gillian West and the fair young man, and at that same moment they recognized him.

He saw the girl flush and speak eagerly to her companion. In another minute he was shaking hands with them both in his correct, rather prim, fashion, and had accepted the shy invitation proffered him to have tea with them.

"I can't tell you, sir," said Mr. Burns, "how grateful I am to you for looking after Gillian the other night. She told me all about it."

"Yes, indeed," said the girl. "It was ever so kind of you."

Mr. Satterthwaite felt pleased and interested in the pair. Their naiveté and sincerity touched him. Also, it was to him a peep into a world with which he was not well acquainted. These people were of a class unknown to him.

In his little dried up way, Mr. Satterthwaite could be very sympathetic. Very soon he was hearing all about his new friends. He noted that Mr. Burns had become Charlie, and he was not unprepared for the statement that the two were engaged.

"As a matter of fact," said Mr. Burns with refresh-candor, "it just happened this afternoon. Didn't it, Gil?"

Burns was a clerk in a shipping firm. He was making a fair salary, had a little money of his own, and the two proposed to be married quite soon.

Mr. Satterthwaite listened, and nodded, and congratulated.

An ordinary young man, he thought

to himself, a very ordinary young man. Nice, straightforward young chap, plenty to say for himself, good opinion of himself without being conceited, nice-looking without being unduly handsome. Nothing remarkable about him; he would never set the Thames on fire. And the girl loved him.

Aloud he said: "And Mr. Eastney—"

He purposely broke off, but he had said enough to produce an effect for which he was not unprepared. Charlie Burns' face darkened, and Gillian looked troubled. More than troubled, he thought.

"I don't like it," she said in a low voice. Her words were addressed to Mr. Satterthwaite, as though she knew by instinct that he would understand a feeling incomprehensible to her lover. "You see, he's done a lot for me. He's encouraged me to take up singing, and—and helped me with it. But I've known all the time that my voice wasn't really good, not first class. Of course, I've had engagements—"

She stopped.

"You've had a bit of trouble, too," said Burns. "A girl wants some one to look after her. Gillian's had a lot of unpleasantness, Mr. Satterthwaite. Altogether she's had a lot of unpleasantness. She's a good looker, as you can see, and—well, that often leads to trouble for a girl."

**B**ETWEEN THEM, Mr. Satterthwaite became enlightened as to various happenings which were vaguely classed by Burns under the heading of "unpleasantness." The young man who had shot himself, the extraordinary conduct of

the bank manager—who was a married man, the violent stranger—who must have been balmy, and the wild behavior of the elderly artist.

A trail of violence and tragedy that Gillian West had left in her wake, recited in the commonplace tones of Charlie Burns. "And it's my opinion," he ended, "that this fellow Eastney is a bit cracked. Gillian would have had trouble with him if I hadn't turned up to look after her."

His laugh sounded a little fatuous to Mr. Satterthwaite, and no responsive smile came to the girl's face. She was looking earnestly at Mr. Satterthwaite.

"Phil's all right," she said slowly. "He cares for me, I know, and I care for him like a friend. But—but not anything more. I don't know how he'll take the news about Charlie. He—I'm so afraid he'll be—"

She stopped, inarticulate in face of the dangers she vaguely sensed.

"If I can help you in any way," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "pray command me."

He fancied Charlie Burns looked vaguely resentful, but Gillian said at once: "Thank you."

Mr. Satterthwaite left his new friends after having promised to take tea with Gillian on the following Thursday.

When Thursday came, Mr. Satterthwaite felt a little thrill of pleasurable anticipation. He thought: "I am an old man, but not too old to be thrilled by a face. A face—" Then he shook his head with a sense of foreboding.

Gillian was alone. Charlie Burns was to come in later. She looked much happier, Mr. Satterthwaite thought, as

though a load had been lifted from her mind. Indeed, she frankly admitted as much.

"I dreaded telling Phil about Charlie. It was silly of me. I ought to have known Phil better. He was upset, of course, but no one could have been sweeter. Really sweet he was. Look what he sent me this morning—a wedding present. Isn't it magnificent?"

It was indeed rather magnificent for a young man in Philip Eastney's circumstances. A wireless set of the latest type.

"We both love music so much, you see," explained the girl. "Phil said that when I was listening to a concert on this, I should always think of him a little. And I'm sure I shall. Because we have been such friends."

"You must be proud of your friend," said Mr. Satterthwaite gently. "He seems to have taken the blow like a true sportsman."

Gillian nodded. He saw the quick tears come into her eyes.

"He asked me to do one thing for him. Tonight is the anniversary of the day we first met. He asked me if I would stay at home quietly this evening and listen to the wireless program, not go out with Charlie anywhere. I said, of course, I would, and that I was very touched, and that I would think of him with a lot of gratitude and affection."

Mr. Satterthwaite nodded, but he was puzzled. He was seldom at fault in his delineations of character, and he would have judged Philip Eastney quite incapable of such a sentimental request. The young man must be of a more banal order than he supposed.

Gillian evidently thought the idea quite in keeping with her rejected lover's character. Mr. Satterthwaite was a little—just a little—disappointed. He was sentimental himself, and knew it, but he expected better things of the rest of the world. Besides sentiment belonged to his age. It had no part to play in the modern world.

He asked Gillian to sing and she complied. He told her her voice was charming, but he knew quite well in his own mind that it was distinctly second class. Any success that could have come to her in the profession she had adopted would have been won by her face, not her voice.

He was not particularly anxious to see young Burns again, so presently he rose to go. It was at that moment that his attention was attracted by an ornament on the mantelpiece which stood out among the other rather gimcrack objects like a jewel on a dust heap.

It was a curving beaker of thin green glass, long-stemmed and graceful, and poised on the edge of it was what looked like a gigantic soap bubble, a ball of iridescent glass. Gillian noticed his absorption.

"That's an extra wedding present from Phil. It's rather pretty, I think. He works in a sort of glass factory."

"It is a beautiful thing," said Mr. Satterthwaite reverently. "The glass blowers of Murano might have been proud of that."

He went away with his interest in Philip Eastney strangely stimulated. An extraordinarily interesting young man. And yet the girl with the wonderful face preferred Charlie Burns. What a

strange and most inscrutable universe!

It had just occurred to Mr. Satterthwaite that owing to the remarkable beauty of Gillian West, his evening with Mr. Quin had somehow missed fire. As a rule, every meeting with that mysterious individual had resulted in some strange and unforeseen happening.

It was with the hope of perhaps running against the man of mystery that Mr. Satterthwaite bent his steps toward the *Arlecchino* Restaurant where once, in the days gone by, he had met Mr. Quin and which Mr. Quin had said he often frequented.

Mr. Satterthwaite went from room to room at the *Arlecchino*, looking hopefully about him, but there was no sign of Mr. Quin's dark smiling face. There was, however, somebody else. Sitting at a small table alone was Philip Eastney.

THE PLACE was crowded and Mr. Satterthwaite took his seat opposite the young man. He felt a sudden strange sense of exultation, as though he were caught up and made part of shimmering pattern of events. He was in this thing—whatever it was.

He knew now what Mr. Quin had meant that evening at the opera. There was a drama going on, and in it was a part, an important part for Mr. Satterthwaite. He must not fail to take his cue and speak his lines.

He sat down opposite Philip Eastney with the sense of accomplishing the inevitable. It was easy enough to get into conversation. Eastney seemed anxious to talk. Mr. Satterthwaite was, as al-

ways, an encouraging and sympathetic listener. They talked of the war, of explosives, of poison gases. Eastney had a lot to say about these last, for during the greater part of the war he had been engaged in their manufacture. Mr. Satterthwaite found him really interesting.

There was one gas, Eastney said, that had never been tried. Great things had been hoped for it. One whiff of it was deadly. He warmed to animation as he spoke.

Having broken the ice, Mr. Satterthwaite gently turned the conversation to music. Eastney's thin face lit up. He spoke with the passion and abandon of the real music lover. They discussed Yoaschbim and the young man was enthusiastic. Both he and Mr. Satterthwaite agreed that nothing on earth could surpass a really fine tenor voice.

"Do you know that Caruso could sing to a wineglass and shatter it?" Eastney demanded.

"I always thought that was a fable," said Mr. Satterthwaite, smiling.

"No, it's gospel truth, I believe. The thing's quite possible. It's a question of resonance."

He went off into technical details. His face was flushed and his eyes shone. The subject seemed to fascinate him, and Mr. Satterthwaite noted that he seemed to have a thorough grasp of what he was talking about.

The older man realized that he was talking to an exceptional brain, a brain that might almost be described as that of a genius. Brilliant, erratic, undecided as yet as to the true channel to give it outlet, but undoubtedly genius.

And he thought of Charlie Burns and

wondered at Gillian West's behavior.

It was with quite a start that he realized how late it was getting, and he called for his bill. Eastney looked slightly apologetic.

"I'm ashamed of myself, running on so," he said. "But it was a lucky chance that sent you along here tonight. I—I needed some one to talk to this evening."

He ended the speech with a curious little laugh. His eyes were still blazing with some subdued excitement. Yet there was something tragic about him.

"It has been quite a pleasure," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "Our conversation has been most interesting and instructive to me."

He made his funny, courteous little bow and passed out of the restaurant. The night was a warm one, and as he walked slowly down the street a very odd fancy came to him. He had the feeling that he was not alone, that some one was walking by his side. In vain he told himself that the idea was a delusion—it persisted.

Some one was walking beside him down that dark, quiet street, some one whom he could not see. He wondered what it was that brought the figure of Mr. Quin so clearly before his mind. He felt exactly as though Mr. Quin were there walking beside him, and yet he had only to use his eyes to assure himself that it was not so, that he was alone.

But the thought of Mr. Quin persisted, and with it came something else; a need, an urgency of some kind, an oppressive foreboding of calamity. There was something he must do—and

do quickly. There was something very wrong, and it lay in his hands to put it right.

So strong was the feeling that Mr. Satterthwaite forbore to fight against it. Instead, he shut his eyes and tried to bring that mental image of Mr. Quin nearer. If he could only have asked Mr. Quin—but even as the thought flashed through his mind, he knew it was wrong. It was never any use asking Mr. Quin anything. "The threads are all in your hands." That was the kind of thing Mr. Quin would say.

The threads. Threads of what? He analyzed his own feeling and impressions carefully. That presentiment of danger now. Whom did it threaten?

At once a picture rose up before his eyes, the picture of Gillian West sitting alone listening to the wireless.

**M**R. SATTERTHWAITE flung a penny to a passing newspaper boy and snatched at a paper. He turned at once to the London radio program. Yoaschbim was broadcasting tonight, he noted with interest. He was singing, *Salve, Dimora* from "Faust," and afterward a selection of his folk songs: *The Shepherd's Song, The Fish, The Little Deer, et cetera.*

Mr. Satterthwaite crumpled the paper together. The knowledge of what Gillian was listening to seemed to make the picture of her clearer. Sitting there alone.

An odd request, that of Philip Eastney's. Not like the man, not like him at all. There was no sentimentality in Eastney. He was a man of violent feelings, a dangerous man, perhaps—

Again his thoughts brought up with a jerk. *A dangerous man.* That meant something. The meeting with Philip Eastney tonight—rather odd. A lucky chance, Eastney had said. Was it chance? Or was it part of that interwoven design of which Mr. Satterthwaite had once or twice been conscious that evening?

He cast his mind back. There must be *something* in Eastney's conversation, some clue there. There must, or else why this strange feeling of urgency? What had he talked about? Singing, war work, Caruso.

Caruso. Mr. Satterthwaite's thoughts went off at a tangent. Yoaschbim's voice was fully equal to that of Caruso. Gillian would be sitting listening to it now as it rang out true and powerful, echoing round the room, setting glasses ringing.

He caught his breath. Glasses ringing! Caruso, singing to a wineglass and the wineglass breaking. Yoaschbim singing in the London studio, and in a room over a mile away the crash and tinkle of glass—not a wineglass, a thin green glass beaker. A crystal soap bubble falling, a soap bubble that perhaps was not empty.

It was at that moment that Mr. Satterthwaite, as judged by passers-by, suddenly went mad. He tore open the newspaper once more, took a brief glance at the wireless announcements and then began to run for his life down the quiet street.

At the end of it he found a crawling taxi, and, jumping into it, yelled an address at the driver and the information that it was life or death to get there

quickly. The driver, judging him mentally afflicted but rich, did his utmost.

Mr. Satterthwaite lay back, his head a jumble of fragmentary thoughts, forgotten bits of science learned at school, phrases used by Eastney that night. Resonance—natural periods. . . . If the period of the force coincides with the natural period. . . . There was something about a suspension bridge, soldiers marching over it, and the swing of their stride being the same as the period of the bridge. Eastney had studied the subject. Eastney knew.

At ten forty-five Yoaschbim was to broadcast. It was that now. Yes, but the "Faust" had to come first. It was the *Shepherd's Song* with the great shout after the refrain that would—that would—do what?

The taxi stopped. Mr. Satterthwaite flung himself out and raced up the stone stairs to the second floor like a young athlete. The door of the flat was ajar. He pushed it open, and the great tenor voice welcomed him.

*Shepherd, see thy horse's flowing mane—*

He was in time then. He burst open the sitting room door. Gillian was sitting in a tall chair by the fireplace.

*Barya Mischa's daughter is to wed today,  
To the wedding I must haste away.*

She must have thought him mad. He clutched at her, crying out something incomprehensible, and half pulled, half dragged her out to the stairway.

*To the wedding I must haste away,  
Ya-ha!*

A wonderful high note, full throated, powerful, hit full in the middle, a note any singer might be proud of. And with it another sound, the faint tinkle of broken glass.

A stray cat darted past them and in through the flat door. Gillian made a movement, but Mr. Satterthwaite held her back, speaking incoherently:

"No, no, it's deadly, no smell, nothing to warn you. A mere whiff—"

Gillian stared at him incomprehendingly. . . .

**P**HILIP EASTNEY drew out his watch and looked at it. It was just half past eleven. For the last three-quarters of an hour he had been pacing up and down the Embankment. He looked out over the Thames and then turned—to look into the face of his dinner companion.

"That's odd," he said, and laughed. "We seem fated to run into each other tonight."

"If you call it fate," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

Philip Eastney looked at him more attentively, and his own expression changed. "Yes?" he said quietly.

"I have just come from Miss West's flat."

"Yes?"

"We have—taken a dead cat out of it."

There was silence, then Eastney said: "Who are you?"

Mr. Satterthwaite spoke for some time. He recited the whole story.

"So you see, I was in time," he ended up. He paused and added quite gently: "Have you anything to say?"

He expected something, some outburst, some wild justification. But nothing at all came.

"No," said Philip Eastney quietly, and turned on his heel and walked away.

Mr. Satterthwaite looked after him till his figure was swallowed up in the gloom. In spite of himself, he had a strange fellow feeling for Eastney, the feeling of an artist for another artist, of a sentimental for a real lover, of a plain man for a genius.

At last he roused himself with a start and began to walk in the same direction as Eastney. A fog was beginning to come up. Presently he met a policeman who looked at him suspiciously.

"Did you hear a kind of splash just now?" asked the policeman.

"No," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

The policeman was peering out over the river.

"Another of these suicides, I expect."

"I suppose," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "that they have their reasons."

"Money, mostly," said the policeman. "Sometimes it's a woman," he said, as he prepared to move away. "It's not always their fault, but some women cause a lot of trouble."

"Some women," agreed Mr. Satterthwaite softly.

When the policeman had gone on, he sat down on a seat with the fog coming up all round him, and thought about Helen of Troy, and wondered if she were a nice ordinary woman blessed or cursed with a wonderful face. ♦♦♦

*One doesn't have to cogitate very hard to discover the reason behind Richard Sale's great popularity as a fiction writer and Hollywood director—it's simply that the public knows a good thing and is sold on Sale. Personally, we're also sold on Daffy the Dill, the irrepressible reporter who embarks below on a zany search for a millionaire who wouldn't stay dead.*

## Nail Down The Lid



by RICHARD SALE

I STEPPED INTO the rugless doghouse that the Old Man calls a home—the room with the green door at the south end of the New York *Chronicle's* city room where slaveys like myself go to get burned and come out chastened lads and lassies. "You called me, sire?" I asked.

But Rasputin, as the old man is more tenderly known, was in no mood for the lingo of King Arthur's day. "Listen, Daffy," he said, "didn't you once tell me that you had a bend-the-elbow

acquaintance with the nephew of J. P. Jorgansen?"

"Jorgansen?" I said. "You mean Hank Jorgansen with the trick mustache? Sure, I know him."

"How well?"

"Well enough to insult him," I said. "Matter of fact, Hank, and I hit the tipple one night and we got on pretty well. As I remember it, Hank was all for painting the statue of Our Nation's Discoverer—up in Columbus Circle—with red paint. I restrained him."

"What was the celebration about?"

"Well, you see," I explained, "Hank's uncle was worth around twenty million bucks. I understand he owns seven hundred thousand shares of Aetna Motor Car stock, which was given to him as payment on a bad debt years back when the paper was worth more than the printing. But old J. P. figured that Hank shouldn't be a rich man's playboy. So he made Hank get out in the world, first, and prove he could earn his own living.

"The guy did all right. He got himself a drama critic berth on *U. S. Theatre*. As I remember it, we were celebrating that night because his uncle had decided that Hank had proved he could earn a living and so was going to give him a nice allowance to do with as he pleased.

"Hank instantly quit the mag, of course. Said he didn't want to deprive someone of the job if they needed it more than he did. But I for one didn't blame him. He liked work like I do, and I don't like work at all."

"You know him pretty well," said the Old Man.

"Oh well," I said, bumming one of the cigarettes in his ebony box on the table, "I've exaggerated, of course. You know me, with my penchant for color. I do know the guy, and I did get tight with him that night. But I haven't seen him since. That was two years ago."

"He arrives from Cherbourg today with his uncle," said the Old Man. "Sammy Lyons has already gone down to cover his beat."

"Well, so where do I come in?"

"Sammy won't be covering this an-

gle," said the Old Man. "He doesn't know about it. None of the ship news reporters in this burg know about it. It's a regular secret crossing. Take a gander at this Marconi message." He tossed a radiogram over to me.

It read:

J. P. JORGANSEN AND NEPHEW ABOARD  
UNDER ASSUMED NAME WALTON. SEE  
ME WHEN YOU COME ABOARD. STEVENS.

"George Stevens is chief steward on the S.S. *Quincy Adams*," explained the Old Man. "He's a shipboard pipeline of the *Chronicle's*. You oughta know, sap, that because of such publicity-shy celebrities, we've got a working arrangement with a willing guy on most of the big liners. Stevens makes himself an extra twenty bucks for the trip, providing we think it good enough to use in a story.

"Your job is to go down the river and board the *Quincy Adams*—never mind, that would cost too much. You go down to the pier, and when she docks you go aboard and find Stevens and see where Jorgansen is. The last we heard, he was on his yacht, the *Albatross*, off Greece, but with the international situation so upset, he must have got scared and pulled out for home by plane and liner. You get in and see him and we've got an exclusive story. Think you can do it?"

"I know I can," I said. "For as I remember now, Hank Jorgansen owes me a fin he borrowed on the night of that delicious debauchery, and this is the time to get it back."

"She docks at eleven," said the Old

Man. "That cuts the throat of the home edition, but you get your yarn in for the Wall Street closing or I'll cut *your* throat. Personally and with pleasure. He's aboard, so don't give me alibis."

"I'll bring him back alive," I said, and went out.

THE S.S. QUINCY ADAMS docked at the pier at 46th Street and the North River. On maps and everywhere else, they call it the Hudson River, but every time a ship docks, it's called the North River. No one has ever told me why. Anyway, when she warped in, with tugs butting her bow and stern, there I was, all fitted out for a spring launching.

As soon as a gangplank came down, I went up. The passengers weren't even off yet, but the old press card really works sometimes. I felt like a sailor when I hit her decks. I could afford to feel that way. I wasn't going to get mal-de-merish on a stormy crossing.

Stevens, the chief steward, was hard to find. He'd buttered his bread on the way over, and now he was in the process of collecting his tips. When I found him, I slipped him a pair of saw-bucks and he said, "Cabin 120 on A deck. The name is Walton, supposedly. I don't think there's any rush. They called for an ambulance and I don't think they plan to go off ship at once. They'll wait until all passengers have cleared customs and departed. They don't want the slightest publicity."

I said, "How did you guess who they were?"

"Saw the young fellow's passport,"

replied Stevens. "Henry Jorgansen. I keep my eyes open for tips. Just added one and one."

"That added up to twenty bucks, eh?" I said. "Okay, palsy. You seen your duty and you did it. Now you can run along and collect from the hens whose hands you held when they felt green on the way over."

He grinned. "You're psychic," he said. "I hope you get a good story."

They had already connected the land cables to the ship's telephone, so I called the *Chronicle* and got the Old Man. "Check and double-check," I said. "Send over a fotog and flash bulbs. They've asked for an ambulance to take the old boy off. Send Billy Woods and tell him to grab a shot of the hearse-for-the-living when they load seven hundred shares of Aetna Motor stock into it, dead or alive."

"Okay," said the Old Man. "I'll send him."

"Just tell him to watch the ambulance and get a shot. Nothing else," I said. "I'll handle the boat end."

"You'll probably man-handle that end, but all right." He hung up.

I went up to A deck and searched along the corridors until I found room number 120. Did I say room? I mean suite. It had an entire alcove to itself. I went down the alcove and knocked on the door. There was a pause and then a man moved across to the door.

"Hello?" he said. "Who's there?"

"Radiogram, Mr. Walton," I said.

"Slide it under the door," he said.

"Sorry, Mr. Walton," I said. "You'll have to sign for it. We're in port now."

He opened the door, took one look

at me, and started to slam it shut, but I stuck my foot in the crack and he couldn't close it.

"Take it easy," I said. "Right now I'm the only reporter who knows you're coming on this ship. You close me out and I'll let every ship man in the Fourth Estate hear my yell and your incognito will be just a memory. Do you savvy, Henry?"

"Eh?" Henry Jorgansen stared at me. He stared a long time. Then his face went dead white. I didn't know I was the sort of picklepuss that makes men pale, but he paled. "Daffy Dill, of all people!"

"Let me in," I said. "You owe me a statement. You owe me a lot of guff. And you owe me five fish."

"Can't come in," he said quickly. "You can't come in, Daffy. Look. Keep everything quiet, and I'll come out. I'll give you the story, Daffy, but for Pete's sake, don't come in."

"You come out in one minute flat."

"I'll come out right now." He opened the door nervously and slipped out. "The lounge," he said. "Let's go to the lounge."

We WENT to the lounge and when we got there, we both sat down and had cigarettes. He was pretty nervous. The lounge was deserted. Everybody was trying to get off the ship; no one was hanging around.

"Take it easy," I said to him. "You're shaking like a jitterbug with the seven year itch. Is it *that* important for you and your uncle to sneak back into the country without flushing a bevy of reporters out of the underbrush?"

"Golly, Daffy," he said, "you kind of took my breath away. I thought we'd put it over. You just surprised me."

"And you," I said, "surprise me. Where did that lovely mustache of yours go?"

"I got rid of that long time ago," he said. "Look, Daffy. Be a good scout, will you? Ask me anything and I'll give, I'll tell the truth, and then let me get back to the Guvnor. He'll be hopping mad if he finds out a newspaper knows he's back."

"Why all the secrecy?" I said.

"He's got a complex," said Henry Jorgansen. "He's been through a nervous breakdown and he resents any intrusion on his privacy. He even carries a gun now, and he won't go to the office any more. He won't do anything. He's turned everything over to me, and he takes my head off if anything goes wrong. It's a case for a psychiatrist, but I'm not going to argue with a guy who's going to leave me twenty million bucks when he kicks in. So for Pete's sake get your story and blow. Don't let him see you."

"Sure," I said. "What's he done, given you power of attorney?"

"Yes. Oh, times have changed since the night we hit the bottle. I can have most anything I want now. But don't kid yourself; he watches every move like a hawk. He may be sick but he's still shrewd. If I have easy money, Daffy, I work like a dog for it, keeping him from pulling his hair out. Or mine."

"Last reports had you aboard the yacht at Athens."

"He got nervous over there. He

wanted the peace and quiet of the U.S.A. A few affairs to settle in New York, and then he's going on to Asheville to rest up. I'm going to hang around New York."

"What does he think of the market?"

"He's worried about it. He thinks there'll be a rise, though."

I got up and shook hands with him. "All right," I said. "Just checking, palsy. There ain't no news in the old boy, so I'll skip along. Give me a ring after you get rid of the buzzard and maybe we can go off on another party like that one two years back. I'm just getting over it."

"Fine!" he said with great enthusiasm. "Fine!"

I knew he would watch me, so I walked off, down the gangplank, and got in a cab and left the pier.

I went back to the *Chronicle* office and waited in the Old Man's office until Billy Wood came in with his exposed negative.

"Did you get it?" the Old Man said, in tones which bespoke guillotining if he had failed.

"Sure I got it," said the fotog, "and no flash bulb stuff either. There was plenty of light there for a straight shot, and I took it and no one on the pier knew that I got it. If you can sneak 'em, it's always better than using a flash bulb. Saves broken jaws and broken cameras. I'll run this through and give it to you."

When he came back, later, he had a wet print. He handed it to the Old Man. "Nice going," said the Old Man. "Very nice indeed, Billy. Take a gander, Daffy."

I took a gander. It was a nice shot indeed. The guy was in a wheel chair, with Hank Jorgansen just behind him and two internes shielding him in front. Private ambulance men, they were. But Billy had taken the shot right between them and got the guy in the chair full face. You could even see the rear of the ambulance. It was a fine shot indeed.

"Chief," I said, "don't run it."

Rasputin stared at me shrewdly. I'll say this for him: he never thinks you're crazy until he has exhausted the possibility of a news story. "Why not?"

"Because," I said, "that guy in the chair isn't J. P. Jorgansen."

**T**HE OLD MAN stared at the face, then called the morgue for other earlier shots of old J. P. When they arrived, he compared them. He dismissed Billy, and then turned to me.

"All right, Daffy. Nice spotting. It's not Jorgansen. But that's his nephew."

"Oh, it's his nephew all right," I said. "But something is brewing. Now, you've got a very minor exclusive for the ship news column which isn't worth too much. Good for today and a dead duck tomorrow. Something else is brewing, something bigger. Don't run that picture. Let Hank Jorgansen think he stuck hay in my hair, and let the whole thing ride. I'll check and find out what goes on. It may be no story at all, and you lose. But it may be a big yarn, and big is spelled with a capital B."

"What's on your mind?"

"Only this," I said. "I haven't got the face of a Dracula so that a man

should pale at the sight of me. And Hank Jorgansen went dead white when he saw me. Why? Because I was in the way and dangerous."

"Well?"

"He's been given power of attorney by his rich uncle! Hah! Very odd. Rich uncle gives him power of attorney. Means he can draw dough and sell stock as he wishes, having only to answer to J. P. himself. He returns from a European trip with his uncle. Only it isn't his uncle. Did any one see J. P. go to Europe? I mean *see*, with two good eyes. When was he last seen?"

"You're asking me?" the Old Man said. "You're a newshound. Go out and find out yourself. That's your job."

"So sweet of you," I grinned, "but I think I will."

The first thing I did was to call the S.S. *Quincy Adams* and get in touch with Stevens, the chief steward.

"Stevens," I said, "this is Daffy Dill, of the *Chronicle*. We're interested in knowing how you got the tip that the Jorgansens were aboard."

"That's simple enough," said Stevens. "The young Mr. Jorgansen told me. He said I could give out to the press after he and his uncle had left the ship and not before. He wanted you all to know, but not until they got home."

"There were just the two of them aboard in that suite?"

"That's right. The older man and him."

"Thanks." I hung up. I had hardly done so when the phone rang again, and Gert Dodge at the switchboard out front said, "There's a call for you,

Daffy. Here's your party on the wire right now."

"Hello," I said. "The Dill speaking."

There was a brief pause and then a sharp, cantankerous voice snapped out. "This is J. P. Jorgansen, young man, and I just wanted you to know that I'm alive and well, and I'll thank you to mind your own business and stop interfering and leave me alone, understand?"

"Wait a minute, Mr. Jorgansen," I began, but he hung up on me.

Well, well. I felt flat-footed. It was old J. P. all right and no imitation. I'd heard that nasty old voice before, in person, and it was one you didn't forget. Very, very distinctive.

It floored me. I went in and told the Old Man. It floored him too.

"Well, the day of telepathy is here," he said hollowly. "You were just suspecting something might be wrong with him and he telephones you to tell you to mind your own business. Shakespeare's classic remark upon the scent of conditions in Denmark is my opinion of it. Are you sure it was J. P. Jorgansen?"

"Chief," I said, "it was he, and no kidding. If it wasn't, the guy who did it should be on the radio. He's that good. I know blame well Hank Jorgansen never could have imitated himself as well as that."

"Want some advice?"

"Give," said I. "This is one of the few times I'll take it."

"Sit tight a day or so and see what young Jorgansen has up his sleeve. He's got something on his mind and maybe a blank day will bring it out."

It was a good idea and I decided to try it.

I DROPPED in at police headquarters the next morning around eleven a.m. and went upstairs to the homicide bureau to have a chat with Lieutenant William "Poppa" Hanley, the P.D.'s claim to fame. There was nothing unusual in this. I was just making my normal rounds as a reporter of crime, and I always stopped in to see Poppa when I was in the building, to see if he had any cases on the docket.

He was just leaving his office with Dr. Kerr Kyne, chief M.E. of New York County, when I stopped by. His homely pan was flushed and he was chewing on an unlighted cigar. Since Poppa did not smoke, and since his chewing of a cigar—any cigar—indicated probable thunderstorms, with a corpse or two in the coppice, I said, "Whoa!"

"Daffy," said Poppa warmly, "I gave you a ring at the office and they said you were out. I got a case."

"Scotch or rye?" I said.

He looked pained, swallowed the dirty crack he'd had on his tongue to throw back at me, and said, "Listen, screwball, a guy has been murdered, and I thought you might be interested in the story. Black Maria picked up this stiff early this morning, and Doc Kyne and me were just going over to the morgue to take a look at him."

I went along. Poppa Hanley drove us over in his prowler car. I never did like the morgue; it's a depressing place. It isn't just the stiffness in their little cupboards. You expect that. It's just the

whole atmosphere. There's death in the air, and you can feel it.

"This guy," Hanley said, "was picked up in the street this morning. Shot dead, one slug. In the head. They sent his prints over and we checked them. He's Neely LaSalle, a confidence man who spent more of his life in Sing Sing than he did in New York. A dapper, gentlemanly sort of bird who was once a ham actor. This punk's *Hamlet* is the reason Shakespeare cracked his slab, turning over in his grave. We checked on him before we came over, and it seems he's been out of the burg since the middle of May. Told Phil Wallace, who is a stoolie, that he had a windfall and was skipping the burg on May 20th. Yesterday afternoon he showed up, flush with dough. He still had the dough when they found him. Five grand in cash."

"Let's see him," I said.

They pulled him out and took the sheet off his face. "Very neat job," Dr. Kyne said. "Almost a contact shot—the powder burns are grouped close around the wound. It's almost a cinch he knew the man who killed him. They must have stopped to talk and he was killed without knowing he would be. I'll guess at a .38 before I even try to find the bullet."

I took a deep breath and tried to relax, but I couldn't relax. I was too excited. I said as casually as possible, "Well, Poppa, there isn't anything I can do around here. And I've got another yarn to cover before deadline so I'll be on my way."

"You act," Poppa said cannily, "kind of suspicious. Sure you never saw this

bird before in your life?" he asked.

"Oh, I may have seen him before," I said, "but that doesn't do much good. You already know who he is, don't you?"

"Daffy, you've got ideas."

"All right, Poppa. I have. And I never cut you out of one yet, did I? I've got to cover. The minute I know anything I'll telephone you and you can come running."

Hanley nodded, and I left. I had a feeling his eyes were following me. I heard Dr. Kyne say, "Wait a second. What's this?"

I paused at the door and saw him pick a wisp of dust off the dead man's hair, so I went back. He held it in his hand. It was just a little cluster of gray dust which you're liable to see on any rug that hasn't seen a vacuum cleaner. But even as he held it in his hand, it melted and was gone. Poppa and the doctor stared at each other. I really left this time and took a cab up Fifth Avenue.

**I**F HANK JORGANSEN lived at his uncle's mansion, and it was a foregone conclusion that he did, I knew where to find him. J. P. Jorgansen owned a granite-faced three-story home on Fifth just above 62nd Street.

The place was sedate and well-kept, with a small iron gate to the right that led back into a lovely little garden. You couldn't see the garden from the street, but from the rear windows of the house it was pretty. I rang the doorbell and waited for a butler to open up.

No butler opened up at all. The door inched aside and Hank Jorgansen him-

self had done the job of answering.

"It's the Dill," I said, "and I want to see you, Henry, and 'no' will be rejected like the enemy's peace proposal."

Henry Jorgansen hesitated, then opened the door and I went in. "The living room is at the left," he said. "Please go in there, Daffy."

"I know where the living room is," I said. "I brought you home here that wild night. Had to carry you in. It was a plum sofa, I remember it as plain as day."

I went in and it was still plum. The living room was quite lush—Oriental rugs, gleaming tapestries lining the walls. I saw the telephone on a small table near a writing desk to one side of the room. I went over and stared at it.

There was a wisp of dust on the floor. I heard Hank Jorgansen come in behind me, and I knew he was staring at my back. I stooped down and picked up the wisp of dust. It was a sizable thing, about the breadth of a half dollar.

"You ought to clean your house," I said. "Where are the servants?"

"They haven't come back yet," he said. "We just got in, you know."

"I know old J. P." I said, "and when he comes home, the servants are waiting at the door to strew roses in his path."

I held the dust between my forefinger and thumb and squeezed it with the warmth and pressure of my hand. Half of the dust clot vanished. "Very odd dust," I said. "Very odd dust indeed . . . Say, I had a telephone call from your uncle."

"I know," he said. "I was here when he called you. He's a sharp old bird, Daffy. Wanted to know if—oh well—all about your trip to the boat. He made me tell him. He called you at once. Tough old bird."

"I'll say he's tough," I said. "For a dead man, he's as voluble as a phonograph record."

Hank Jorgansen opened his mouth to speak, then shut it, then opened it again. "What did you say?"

"I said that for a dead man he talks his head off. When a man is dead, he should stay dead. He shouldn't be jumping out of his grave and talking to wary reporters to reassure them that he still inhabits the earth. It's misleading. If I were you, I'd go back where you put him and nail the lid down to make certain he stays put. Nail the lid down, Hank."

"You're crazy as a loon," he said. "You don't make sense. My uncle isn't dead. He isn't in good health but he certainly is a live ghost. I wish you had to listen to him—"

"I'd love to listen to him," I said, "in person. But I'll bet you all the money I have in this world that you can't arrange it."

"As a matter of fact, he has left New York," he said. "He decided to go down to Asheville without waiting."

"Sure," I said, "and when I got in touch with Asheville, he'd have gone some place else. He'd always be a step ahead of the press."

"You're talking through your hat," he said, a trifle pale. "If he talked to you on the telephone, how could he be dead?"

"Now take this piece of dust I'm holding in my hand," I said. "It's not really dust. Know what it is, Henry the Jorgansen? Watch it. If you held a hunk of dust in your hand it would last a long time. But this doesn't last. It melts. Watch. I squeeze it and it vanishes. I put it in the palm of my hand and it just melts away. Very odd dust, eh?"

"Yes," he said, watching me sharply. "Very odd."

"It's not dust," I said. "I found it by your telephone."

"And what is it?" he asked with sarcasm. "Moss scrapings from a dead man's skull?" He was sneering but he was dead white.

"No," I said. "It's wax. A wax shaving. You know where it came from? It came from a waxed cylinder. Funny thing about a dictaphone, Henry, but when you talk into the mouthpiece and record your voice upon the cylinder, the sapphire cutting needle cuts a groove, and in cutting the groove it pulls off strips of wax with which the cylinder is coated. Shavings we call them. And when you replay a cylinder, some of the shavings get pushed off by the action of the playback needle in those same grooves. Want me to tell you who called me?"

**H**E DIDN'T say anything. He was white as a ghost and his fingers were plucking at his coat pocket nervously.

"Your uncle telephoned me. Or let's say that you telephoned me and your uncle spoke with me. He spoke with me via an old recording, a dictated cyl-

inder which you still own. I don't know about the message; it could have applied to almost anyone who'd wanted to see him."

"This," he said thickly, "is all utterly fantastic."

"This morning," I said, "I found your friend in the morgue. The guy who came back on the boat with you, posing as your uncle. The same guy you paid five grand to go aboard with you and pose as your uncle. Always, he kept in the background, but you got around and had a swell time. We got a foto of him being loaded in the ambulance yesterday. He's in the morgue today, dead of the gunshot wound you neatly put in his head."

Henry Jorgansen's mouth was too dry for words.

"It's all simple enough. You killed the old boy two months ago. He was going to cut you off, or else you got tired of waiting, but I think maybe your parties were too much for him and he threatened to cut you off without a cent. So you forged power of attorney and killed him. You didn't want him found, for that meant murder and you had the only real motive. So you kept him alive, technically, and enjoyed his estate through the forged power of attorney. Damn clever, boy. But you should have nailed down the lid." I shook my head. "You should have—"

His hand was in his pocket and he pulled out a Smith & Wesson .38 and tried to gun me, but I was out of the chair and at him in no time.

I threw my left hand down on his right so that the gun pointed at the

floor when it went off, and then I crossed a right to his jaw which made my knuckles crack and tore the skin off them. Man, that was a punch. It hurt my hand. I knocked him clean off the arm of the chair where he had been sitting and he fell on the floor.

But he still had the gun and he fired twice at me and missed, and spoiled a swell oil painting on the wall behind me.

I jumped his gun and kicked it out of his hand with a lucky boot; and as he scrambled to his feet, I clipped him again, from the floor up, and I thought for a second that I'd broken his neck, it snapped so hard. I drove him clean out into the hall and he would have fallen and passed out cold except that he fell into a man's arms.

"Darn you, Poppa," I said in admiration, "I don't see how you do it. A nick-in-timer if there ever was one. But I didn't need you this time."

"You sure did. I could tell by the gleam in your eyes at the morgue that something was on the make and I was right. I've had an eye parked at that front window for ten minutes. I practically stayed in your shadow on the way up here. And when he pulled the gun, I just came in. I have keys that'll fit most doors. How many times have I told you never to jump a gun, stupid?"

"I got him, didn't I?" I said.

"Go on," he said. "You're slipping, Daffy. You had to hit him twice."

We carried him out to the prow car together and all the way down to headquarters we grinned at each other like a pair of fools.

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*In his busy career, George Harmon Coxe has been an advertising man, a movie writer and a war correspondent, besides writing more than a score of novels and countless numbers of magazine stories. However, probably none of his experiences has brought richer rewards for his reading public than his early stint as a newspaperman. For without a doubt the most beloved of all his characters is Flashgun Casey, the cynical, sentimental ace fotog for the Express. Here's Flash at his best, starting out in all innocence to help a drunk—and helping himself to murder by the hatful.*



## Once Around The Clock

by GEORGE HARMON COXE

**G**us, the night bartender at Pinelli's Grill, squirmed off his stool and yawned audibly as he cast an eye at the clock atop the cash register. The hands pointed to midnight. As though waiting for this moment, Casey, number one camera for the *Express*, drained his glass and set it down.

"Another day, another dollar," he said wearily.

Gus, a white-aproned Falstaff, punched the register, spun two dimes at Casey and reached tentatively for a

bottle. "A short one before you go, Flash?"

"Not tonight. I'm going home."

"Lucky you."

"Yeah," said Casey. "Lucky me." He bent a brow at Gus, his voice sardonic. "Follow me around some day and see. Up half of last night on a fire out in Charleston—"

"You eat it up," said Gus.

Casey snorted good-naturedly and turned away, hearing Gus' goodnight, and in the background, the clink of his

two dimes in the glass set aside for tips next to the cash register.

Casey, reaching for a cigarette as he walked, saw that the stool behind the cashier's desk was vacant. A waiter stood in front of it and, leaning across the counter, staring moodily at the night outside, was Sam Pinelli.

Casey stopped and lit the cigarette.

Pinelli continued to brood and Casey said: "Edith gone?"

"Yes. Two—three minutes."

"Oh," Casey said. "I thought I'd give her a lift."

Pinelli turned suddenly, his face dark. "Then whadda you wait for? Why don't you come?"

Casey blinked. "She works till twelve, don't she? She usually has to get her coat and hat."

"She's a go early," Pinelli said. Then explosively: "Itsa that bum, Bronson. Drink, drink, drink. Alla time since he get out."

There was more sputtering but Casey knew what he meant. Lew Bronson had been in the booth opposite the counter when Casey came in less than a half hour before. Even then he was in a bit of stupor. Now, apparently, Edith Roberts, the cashier, was taking him home.

"Itsa shame," Pinella was saying. "She's too nice a girl for that bum. Maybe they put him back in jail, you think?"

Casey said he didn't know and was flipping up the collar of his balmacaan when he saw the policeman crossing diagonally from the other side of the street. Walking fast, he was angling toward the inner edge of the sidewalk

when he passed the window. Something in his manner suggested that he had a very definite mission in view.

Casey opened the door and went out. Then he saw what the cop was after. A few feet to the right was a woman and a staggering man, quite obviously drunk. A taxi stood at the curb, the driver waiting beside the open door.

The cop had ahold of the man's shoulder. The woman had his other arm and was arguing with the cop, and even in the shadows Casey could see that the woman was Edith Roberts and the drunk was Lew Bronson.

"He'll be all right," Edith was saying. "Really he will. If I could just get him home."

"Stand up, you," the cop said. He jerked the man roughly about and shook him. "Hey! Bronson!"

Bronson mumbled some answer and tried to pull free, and by this time Casey had moved up beside the group. The cop, concentrating on Bronson, apparently spotted the big photographer from the corner of his eye.

"Go on, bud," he ordered over his shoulder. "Take a walk."

"Quiet, Kelleher," said Casey.

The cop quit shaking Bronson and turned.

"Listen, you!" he began, then his eyes widened. "Oh, hello, Flashgun. Didn't recognize you."

"Flash," Edith Roberts said, her voice quick with relief. "You'll help me, won't you?" Casey already had slid an arm under Bronson's armpit. "I can handle him, Kelleher," he said. "He was in Pinelli's and gargled a couple too many."

"Then keep him off the street," Kelleher said. "The next thing he'll be violating his parole and back he'll go for a couple more years. I ain't so sure he oughtn't to."

CASEY got Bronson into the waiting cab and Edith climbed in the opposite side, giving the driver the address. Bronson sat, his chin on his chest, mumbling thick words that made no sense. Casey propped him up to keep him from falling sideways and looked at the girl.

"Still in love with him, huh?" he said.

"I don't know." She was silent for quite a while. "I'm grateful to him, I know that. And he's not well, Flash."

"It's not just his health."

"But he hasn't anybody now."

The cab was rolling down Boylston. Darkened store windows mirrored their swift progress and corner lights made a rise and fall of illumination within the cab. Edith Roberts was sitting very straight, her hands in her lap, her profile clean and grave.

About twenty-three, Casey thought, and the things about her he could not see now, he remembered. Rather small, she was, and slender and trim-figured, her body gently rounded and straight along the back. Not pretty, almost plain-looking, really, but nice-looking too with her wavy chestnut hair and eyes of serious brown. There was a quiet genuineness about her that had always impressed him, but she had learned to smile since she had been at Pinelli's and, remembering, Casey knew that Bronson had got the job for her.

That had been three or four years ago when the place was run by Joe Phinney and was called the Club Marseilles. Lew Bronson had played the piano then, and well.

"This is it," Edith Roberts said, and Casey saw that the cab had pulled in toward the curb.

"Give you a hand?" the driver said.

Casey pulled Bronson out and stood him up. "Hold him a minute," he said, and asked the driver what the fare would be to take Edith Roberts home.

"I'll go up with you," the girl said. She was standing beside Casey, one hand on his arm as he paid and tipped the driver.

"You'll get back in the cab," Casey said.

"But can't I—"

"No. What could you do? Get to bed. There's where I'm going to put Lew. He'll be all right."

The girl hesitated; then there was a quick pressure on his arm and she turned away, a wetness glistening on her cheek.

"You're sweet, Flash."

"Ahh—" Casey growled. "What's the apartment number?"

She told him and the driver said: "I'll help you up with him."

"I'll get him," Casey said and tipped Bronson into his arms, carrying him like a baby.

The apartment house wore a cheap-looking front of sand-colored brick, weather-streaked and dirty. There was a sidewalk-level entrance, and when Casey nudged open the glass door he heard the cab drive away. He passed the row of mail boxes on the foyer wall

without a look and trudged up the rubber-treaded stairs.

A night light burned dimly on the second floor landing and the far end of the hall reached into semi-darkness. Puffing a little now from his labor, he glanced at the nearest door number and started along the wall, muttering, "It's a break he don't live on the fourth."

At the last apartment on the right he stopped and tried to hold up Bronson with one arm while he went through his pockets for a key. He got no cooperation. The man's legs were rubbery, and Casey cursed and laid him on the floor.

"Good ol' Flash," Bronson mumbled.

"Shut up," said Casey, and then his hand found something hard and bulky and he forgot about the key.

He swore softly, knowing it was a gun the instant he touched it. When he brought it out, he saw that it was a short-barreled .32 with a pearl handle.

"Oh, you mugg," he said. "You dumb mugg."

"Good ol' Flash," said Bronson.

"Wait'n see," Casey growled, slipping the gun in his pocket and resuming his search. "Wait'n see. You and I are going to have a talk, pal."

He kept talking to himself as he found the key. "Out a week on parole and packing a gun. Boy, if Kelleher had dragged you down for drunk and disorderly, that would have been it."

**H**e got a living-room light on, heeled the door shut and carried Bronson with one arm against his hip. He lurched through a doorway and

dumped his burden on the bed. He went in the bath, found the light and turned on the cold water in the tub. By the time the tub was half full, Bronson was naked and Casey had his coat and vest off, his sleeves rolled up.

"Nothing but skin and bones," he said, and looked down at the mumbly figure before he picked him up.

The face was thin and sallow, and the nondescript brown hair was still cut quite short. The chest was flat and bony. He made a lot of noise as he breathed, and seeing him this way, Casey knew that Lew Bronson had gone a long way down since he had teamed with Alma Sinclair at the old Club Marseilles.

He picked him up in both hands, went into the bathroom and dunked him. For a second nothing happened, then Bronson squirmed. More from instinct than anything else, he tried to lift himself and Casey pushed him back. This time the man's eyes focused, stared. Then he opened his mouth and yelled.

"Shut up!" Casey growled.

Bronson began to thrash around. Casey pushed his head under. The other came up choking and sputtering. "Don't!" he yelled. "Oh, geeze, Flash, you're killing me. Oh, for—"

Casey pushed his head under once more and stepped back. Bronson lashed out blindly and jumped up, gasping, choking, his skin goose-pimpled and bluish. Casey threw a towel at him.

"Rub down. Or do you want me to?"

"No!" Bronson drew back. "No, I'll do it."

"Then get some clothes on. I'll take you down to the corner and buy you some black coffee."

"I'll be all right." Bronson said, but he didn't look it. There was a sickness about his mouth and his eyes were glassy. "Honest. I'll just go straight to bed."

"You're going to drink some coffee," Casey said, "and you're going to get told a few things. Now snap it up."

He went through the bedroom and closed the door. He lit a cigarette, propping himself on a chair arm, his broad face somber, his jaw a little grim. Presently he stood up and began to pace the room, unable to get Edith Roberts out of his mind, and finding his thoughts strangely troubled. He was on his second cigarette when the knock came at the door. He opened it and Sergeant Manahan was standing there, a plainclothes man beside him.

For a long second they stared at each other, and it was a question as to which of the two was the more surprised. Then Manahan pushed in, a chunky, red-faced man with a heavy nose.

"Surprise, huh?" the sergeant said. "Where's Bronson?"

Casey backed away, his frown etched deep and a tightness coming across his chest, for Manahan was attached to Homicide.

"He's dressing," he said.

"Dressing? For what?"

"I just gave him a bath," Casey said and went on to explain how he happened to be there.

Manahan listened, his eyes speculative. Then he shrugged and started for the bedroom door. Casey took his arm.

"Wait a minute," he said. "What cooks?"

"Know Alma Sinclair? Well, somebody knocked her off about an hour ago with a slug in the heart. We found out Bronson was up to her place."

For the next second or two all Casey could do was stare, all he could think of was the gun in his pocket. The tightness screwed down a little harder and he stood quite still, a big, thick-bodied man with an upward-arching chest and a stomach like a washboard. His brown hair was shaggy and streaked with gray at the temples, and in his dark eyes and across his rugged face there was trouble and resignation.

"He was at Pinelli's," he said woodily.

"Don't argue with me about the time," Manahan said. "The lieutenant'll figure that out when we get there."

He stepped past with the plainclothesman at his heels and Casey waited, thinking about Edith Roberts, and the gun in his pocket, and the woman Lew Bronson had gone to prison for—Alma Sinclair.

He heard the door open; then a quick curse shattered his train of thought. He spun toward the bedroom, went in. Manahan and the plainclothesman were leaning out the open window, and Casey elbowed his way beside them. There was a foot-wide ledge stretching across the back of the building, broken by a fire escape fifteen or twenty feet away. Below there was nothing but blackness hemmed in by other walls and fences to make a narrow alleyway.

"So," Manahan snarled. "He was at Pinelli's huh? And you held me up in there."

"Oh, sure," said Casey disgustedly. "He confessed the whole thing. I figured out the getaway for him. Nuts!"

"Come on," said Manahan. "You can sing for the lieutenant."

## CHAPTER TWO

ALMA SINCLAIR lay on her back upon a thick white rug. She wore a hostess gown of black satin, but this had been opened by the examiner's physician to disclose the tearose slip with the ugly red stain between the breasts. In life a fullblown, vital woman, there was now something pathetically incongruous in her very stillness, in the red-painted lips and nails that glared so brightly in death.

Even the room in which she died had lost its character. It was a feminine room, done in whites and pastel blues, and already it had been tarnished by the tramp of heavy shoes, the hubbub of men's voices, the reek of tobacco smoke and cigar butts.

The fingerprint man and photographer was still busy with his brushes and powders. Lieutenant Logan stood in the center of the room, talking with the examiner's physician, who had packed his bag and was ready to leave. Off in one corner sat a blond, bespectacled youth Casey had never seen before, and along one wall two men stood smoking, their coats on and hats in their hands. The taller and younger of the two was Barney Fiske, the other, George Avery. Seeing them here now

reminded Casey that, aside from Lew Bronson, these two had been more closely identified with Alma Sinclair than anyone else in town.

The door opened and two white-coated internes entered with a stretcher. The examiner's man nodded to them. As they lifted the still figure to the canvas, Casey's resentment became a deep and irritable abrasive, directed both at the lieutenant and the circumstances.

Coming in with Sergeant Manahan, he had seen the reporters on the sidewalk, and the photographers from the *News* and the *Star*. In the morning there'd be pictures of that stretcher and the internes, but not in the *Express*. Because Casey had been caught without a camera, and had been given no chance to phone the office and get one.

The examiner's man went out with the stretcher. Lieutenant Logan surveyed the room, his gaze stopping on Casey.

"You don't think Lew had anything to do with it, huh, Flash?"

"No," Casey said sourly.

"You went in Pinelli's at twenty of twelve. Bronson was in a booth. You say he looked as if he'd been drinking." Logan watched the photographer nod and continued. "You had a couple at the bar and when you went out just after midnight, Bronson and the Roberts girl were on the sidewalk." He grunted softly. "Well, it fits. Bronson came up here at eleven-fifteen. He got to Pinelli's five minutes before you did—at twenty-five of twelve—and it's no more than five minutes from here to there."

He glanced at the youth in the corner. "You're positive, are you, Tilden, that Bronson didn't come back out? I mean you weren't in the can getting a snort or something?"

"No, sir," Tilden said.

Logan shrugged. "What did Bronson run out the back way for, Flash? Why'd he take a powder when he heard Manahan's voice over at his place?"

Casey made no comment, but listened as the lieutenant turned back to the youth named Tilden, the night operator of the apartment house. Hearing the rest of the story, he became convinced that he had been wrong from the beginning. The evidence against Bronson was too damning, and it explained why the man had been so drunk. Fear, perhaps remorse, had driven him to it. He had known what was coming and he had taken a weakling's way out.

"There were no calls," Logan was saying, "after Bronson went up until Mr. Avery came in at twenty minutes of twelve?"

"No, sir," Tilden said. "Mr. Avery came in and asked me to ring Miss Sinclair's apartment. I couldn't get any answer. I knew she must be there, and Mr. Avery said she'd asked him to call at eleven-thirty, so—"

"Late, weren't you, Avery?" Logan cut in.

"Yes," Avery said. "I'd stopped in the bar down on the corner, as I told you. I'm not sure how long I was there, but I know I got there before eleven-thirty because I wanted a drink and didn't see what difference it made if I was a little late."

"So you," Logan continued to Tilden, "decided maybe something was wrong, got a pass key and came up with Avery?" He rubbed his palms and looked thoughtful. "What were you going to see her about, Avery?"

"I don't know. She didn't say. She asked me if I could come and I told her I would."

Logan turned to Barney Fiske. "And you walked in here while they were phoning us, huh?"

"There was no one on the board downstairs," Fiske said, "so I came on up."

"Kind of a late call, wasn't it?" asked Logan suspiciously.

"That's what I told her. She phoned me this morning. I told her I had a date—I'd be tied up. She said it didn't matter—to come when I finished."

"And you were with your fiancée, Miss Anderson, until a quarter after eleven?"

Fiske said that was right and Casey, knowing about the girl Logan was referring to, was reminded of many things. Reviewing them, he found the various connections confusing except in one regard—both Fiske and Avery had been close to Alma Sinclair. Avery was her ex-husband and it had been less than a month since she had divorced him and been given a handsome settlement. Barney Fiske had been attentive to Alma during the divorce proceedings, and some had said they would be married when the decree was granted. Instead of that, Helen Anderson had announced her engagement to Fiske less than two weeks previous—Helen Anderson, the social-

ly prominent daughter of a noted surgeon.

**V**AGUELY CASEY heard Logan continue his questioning but his own thoughts remained centered on Avery and Fiske. Both were well groomed and carried an aura of prosperity and good living about them. There was something else they had in common; that suggestion of tempered hardness, the shrewdness of eye, the confidence and poise that come to those who make a success of life. And, materially at least, success had come to them.

George Avery, a lawyer and one-time advisor to the Laundry Workers' Co-operative Union, had more recently become the union's head at a reputed twenty thousand a year. Barney Fiske was a business man whose endeavors had, in the past, run to promotional lines. He had got his start with concessions at the race track and branched out into other fields which included the backing of a restaurant, an interest in a business block, a piece of a show or two.

Beyond these similarities, however, they had little in common. Avery, not more than average height, was a blocky figure, square-faced and dark, with a crisp, aggressive way of talking. Fiske was tall, sandy-haired and handsome, and in his early thirties, several years younger than Avery.

Casey became aware that the two were leaving and heard Logan say: "All right. Thanks. As soon as we pick up Lew Bronson, we'll get in touch with you."

Avery and Fiske went out and Lo-

gan turned to Tilden. "Where can we get you?"

Tilden mentioned an address and Casey studied him. He was very pale and his eyes were harried and restless. Even from where Casey stood, he could see the tremor in his fingers. *Just a kid, Casey thought, and scared to death.*

Logan's gaze came to him as Tilden went out. Casey stared back at him morosely.

"Still think Bronson is in the clear?" Logan asked dryly.

"Who the hell cares what I think?" Casey groused.

"You're sore, huh?"

"Certainly I'm sore."

Logan let one lid come down, a tall, slender figure with black hair and a smooth, hard jaw. He didn't look much like a cop with his neat chesterfield and derby. He was too young too, but he was competent and when he had to be tough he was tough. Now his eyes were sardonic because he'd known Casey a long time and understood his irritation.

"I'm the guy that should be sore," he said. "If you hadn't given Manahan all that con, he would've nailed Bronson before he could duck."

"Oh, sure," Casey said. "So you get pig-headed. I couldn't phone for a camera, huh? I had to stay here and listen to this routine of yours." He snorted and buttoned his coat. "Well, nuts to this. Remind me to do you a favor sometime," he said, and strode over to the door and went out.

The reporters were still waiting for Logan on the sidewalk, being held at

bay by the uniformed husky at the door. They gave Casey some good-natured jeers and he did not bother to lay them back because he saw that Fields and Cohen, the cameras from the *News* and the *Star*, had gone. There was an *Express* photographer now, sitting on his plate-case—Evans, who apparently had been routed out of bed—but it was too late now; there was nothing to photograph.

Casey went over and spoke to him. "Did you get Avery and Fiske when they came out?"

"No," Evans said. "I just got here."

"That's swell," said Casey. "All that leaves you is a bunch of cops."

"Blaine is burning," Evans said, referring to the city editor. "He tried to get you and—"

"Let him burn," said Casey, signaling a cab. "He'll be good and crisp by the time he's ready for me in the morning."

When he had slammed the door and given the driver his address, he took the pearl-handled .32 from his pocket. The instant he sniffed the muzzle he knew it had been fired recently. Slouched back in the corner, he broke the gun and held it nearer the window. Of the five shells in the cylinder, one had been exploded.

He slipped the gun in his pocket again and leaned his head back on the cushion, wondering why he hadn't offered Logan the gun, remembering what the examiner's man had said. One shot, angling laterally to penetrate the edge of the heart, a near contact shot with death practically instantaneous.

IT WAS mid-afternoon before Casey reached police headquarters. When he came into the vaulted entrance foyer, his broad face was glum and his eyes were stormy. He found Lieutenant Logan in his office on the fourth floor, his feet on the desk and his hands locked behind his head.

Logan looked none too happy himself, and neither man spoke until Casey had dropped into a chair and kicked his plate-case over against the wall. Then Logan said: "Now what're you grouching about?"

"I'm in the doghouse."

"Move over."

Casey looked at him with one eye. "You didn't pick up Bronson yet, huh?"

Logan shook his head. "Thanks to you."

"All right," Casey said. "I held Manahan up one minute last night at Bronson's place. Why don't you charge me as an accessory?"

"Maybe I will if the super doesn't crawl off my neck."

Casey lapsed into a morose silence. An assignment near Winthrop where a fishing schooner had gone aground in the early morning fog had occupied several hours, and when he got back to the *Express*, Blaine, the city editor, was laying for him. Blaine had had a lot to say and all of it was sarcastic. He had learned that Casey had been in on the murder investigation the night before and had inquired why the *News* and the *Star* were the only sheets with pictures. Casey told him and then had kept his hands deep in his trousers pockets to help him resist the impulse to

lean across the desk and slap the city editor from his chair. Even thinking about that argument made him furious. He sought refuge now in speech.

"What do you figure Bronson killed her for?"

"You think he didn't?"

"I'm asking," Casey said, feeling the pressure of that pearl-handled revolver in his hip pocket. "You know he went up to Alma's and you know he must've run out the back way. What else?"

"He ran out on you, too," Logan said. "Does there have to be something else?"

"A motive would help."

Logan considered this and his voice grew thoughtful. "I think it might hook up with that Phinney job."

With the mention of that name Casey's mind folded back and he realized he'd had much the same idea. Joe Phinney, who had at that time owned the Club Marseilles, had been shot and killed in his apartment by Lew Bronson. Alma Sinclair had been a witness, and it was largely through her testimony that Bronson had been let off with a manslaughter verdict and a five-year stretch.

Phinney, who, as an out and out racketeer, started the Laundry Workers' Cooperative Union by beating the laundries in line and hiring George Avery to defend his thugs. The result could hardly sustain the theory that hard work and honesty are essential factors for success, because somehow this organization had gradually taken on a cloak of respectability so that, at the time of his death, Phinney was the secretary and treasurer of what passed as

a legitimate labor union with a national affiliation. True, Phinney had remained a crook to the end—after his death a large shortage in accounts was found—but he had kept such deficiencies well covered and, by his ownership of the Club Marseilles, was supposed to be well off.

Logan broke in on Casey's thoughts. "This Alma is a voluptuous number."

"With a capital V."

"She's got looks. She's got a body you rave about. She knows the answers, she knows how to look out for number one and she knows that men are saps. This Bronson is just one of those guys. He plays the piano for her."

"Sinclair and Bronson," Casey said. "It was quite an act." And in his mind's eye he could see them now. Alma out on the nightclub floor with her seductive curves and full-blown body and that torch contralto that always seemed to be singing especially for you. And, outside the range of the spotlight, Bronson pouring out his heart through those piano keys.

"He was nuts about her," Logan went on. "Like a dog, following her around, talking her up, looking for better bookings, getting her started in radio. And what did he ever get?"

"The brush-off," Casey said.

"Yeah." Logan grunted softly. "He knew she'd never go for him but it didn't matter. She knew that and she kept him just like that for what he could do for her. About once a week he'd get kicked around by somebody because he objected to something the guy said about Alma. He was always

thinking guys were making passes at her. I've heard her tell him off. It never did any good. He'd always come back, and she knew it."

**L**OGAN BLEW out his breath and swung his feet down. "So it had to happen sometime. She has a couple of guys on the string and Joe Phinney is top dog. Bronson knows he's a louse. He's afraid he's going to lose Alma—and Phinney isn't good enough for her. You know what happened."

"I know what's on the record," Casey said. "He went to Phinney's apartment and Alma was there and Phinney kicked him around and Bronson shot him."

"Yeah," said Logan. "And there's another story."

"I know that one, too. It says that Bronson didn't shoot Phinney, that Alma did and Bronson took the rap for her."

"It fits," Logan said. "Alma shoots Phinney and calls Lew. For the first time she really needs him and he follows the pattern. What she promises him, we don't know. Maybe nothing. Maybe she says she'll marry him when he gets out. Anyway, they get George Avery to defend him, Alma takes the stand for him, and manslaughter is the best the D.A. can do. All right. Lew's not in the can six months before she marries Avery. Lew has to put in another two years before he can get paroled. By that time Alma has divorced Avery, so Lew isn't sore at him, is he?"

"He's sore at Alma."

"You know it," Logan said. "He's

been around a week lapping it up to get his nerve in shape, and he goes around there and plugs her last night for double-crossing him. And I guess she had it coming."

"If she *did* promise him anything," Casey said. "Suppose she didn't—in the first place, I mean. Lew was the kind of a guy that would have thought up that sacrifice all by himself. If he did, it was because he was nuts about her. And if that was so, he still would be, even now."

"Ahh—"

"I don't say it couldn't be made to fit," Casey argued. "But if we're gonna tailor things, what about Barney Fiske?"

Logan squinted at him. "What about him?"

"For my dough," Casey said, "he's got a better motive than Bronson."

"You're out of your mind."

Casey stood up. "I know it. I know that that lad, Tilden, says nobody went up to Alma's but Bronson, but when you talk about motives, I'll take Barney Fiske."

"O.K." Logan said, grinning, "you can have him."

"Barney's not a bad guy," Casey said. "Maybe he's played a few things fast and loose but he's always been legitimate. I understand he's got a good education—a football player, wasn't he? On one of those backwoods colleges that always buy good teams. And he's made himself some dough. He's a good-looking guy and he wears clothes well—" he paused, screwing one brow down—"almost as well as you."

"Nuts."

"And he's got himself engaged to a nice girl. Those things happen, you know. Helen Anderson isn't the four hundred maybe, but she's near the upper crust and it's a nice step up for Fiske. Good family, a chance to settle down."

"Go on," Logan said. He was listening now. He wasn't throwing away Bronson because the evidence was too strong, but Casey was talking sense.

"Women've always gone for Barney. Alma did too, didn't she? He played around with her all the time she was divorcing Avery. I imagine she found out a lot of things about him, huh? But that's before he meets Helen Anderson. Now things are different. Maybe Alma don't like it. Nobody ever brushed her off before."

Casey hesitated, laughed shortly but without humor. He picked up his plate-case and adjusted his hat.

"Do you want me to draw you a picture?"

The question brought no rise from Logan. Instead he said, thoughtfully: "Jealousy?"

"When you're talking about motives there's none better," Casey said. "It doesn't have to be that either. Alma could tell things about Fiske. She could blackmail him plenty and she sure as hell could break up that engagement if she tried."

He started for the door and Logan scowled at him.

"Where you going?"

"Out."

Logan looked annoyed. Casey had tossed an entirely new hypothesis at him and he didn't like it because it

upset his own theory. Now he eyed the big photographer suspiciously.

"Just out?"

"Yeah," said Casey. "I gotta get me a couple of pictures some place."

And out he went before Logan could reply.

## CHAPTER THREE

**N**UMBER 492 BARRY STREET was a tired-looking brownstone front with a *Rooms To Let* sign in the door and another one in an area-way window which said: *N. D'Antonio—Tailor*.

Casey went up the steps, stopping in the entryway to glance at the name cards tacked on the wall, then continuing to a gloomy high-ceilinged hall that smelled of fried foods and disinfectant.

He went up a long straight staircase, circled at the second floor landing, and went up to the third floor. At the last door on the lefthand side he knocked. There was no answer and he knocked again, at the same time trying the knob.

Examining the lock and finding it to be a spring type, none too expertly installed, he took a thin strip of celluloid from his pocket and slipped it between the moulding and the doorframe, pushing against the sloping surface of the bolt until it slid back.

He caught the knob as the door swung in, looking down the hall and stepped quickly inside. Then, before he could close the door, he saw Harry Tilden, and even in that first glance the limp and shapeless position of the body told him he had come too late.

For long seconds Casey stood there,

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his breath held and a quick cold pressure moving up his spine. Then, not bothering to inspect the still figure on the bed, he slipped back in the hall, pressed the lock button to keep the bolt secure, and went downstairs.

His camera and plate-case were in his coupe. He got them out and came back into the gloomy downstairs hall, meeting a tired-eyed fellow just coming out of one of the main floor rooms. The man did not seem to notice him and he went back upstairs, hurrying a little as he approached the last door. He went in and locked it behind him.

Henry Tilden lay on his back, his face bluish, his eyes wide and staring, his thin-rimmed glasses twisted and bent. His chin was tipped back, disclosing a mark around his skinny throat with a peculiar color—or lack of color—all its own. Across the foot of the bed was a thin bath towel still somewhat twisted. When he could, Casey pulled the gaze from the body, seeing the lavatory in the corner and the rack from which the towel had come. After that he let his breath come out and opened his plate-case to get a flashbulb.

He took two pictures, put the used bulbs back in the case and closed it. There was a worn club chair by the lone window and he sat down a minute to try and assimilate the implications of his discovery.

He had not expected this, even when he had found the door locked, and his coming here had been nothing more than a hunch based upon hope rather than fact. In Logan's office he had accepted the two inescapable alternatives. Either Tilden was telling the truth, in

which case Lew Bronson was guilty, or Tilden was lying. Now there could be no doubt. Tilden had lied and he was dead.

Casey stood up, his eyes troubled and a momentary weariness upon him as he realized that even now there was no conclusive proof of Bronson's innocence. He took a final glance about the room, scarcely seeing its sordidness but only knowing that Tilden had been poor and that an offer of money for his silence had been too tempting to resist.

"Just a kid, too," he said, half aloud, knowing now why Tilden had seemed so scared the night before.

Something about this boy's death stirred him deeply. Last night the sight of Alma Sinclair had left him singularly unmoved—perhaps because he had been prepared. Now it was different, although he did not know why, unless it was because this time the victim was so young and had paid so high a price for something he did not understand. The thought of it, the feel of death that somehow permeated the very room, made him a little sick, and he trudged out, closing the door behind him.

Out on the street once more, he stepped to his coupe to get rid of his camera and plate-case. At a nearby drugstore he telephoned Logan.

"I'm down at Tilden's," he said when the lieutenant answered. "I remembered the address he gave you last night, and when I phoned Alma's apartment house they told me he wasn't due until six. So I came out."

"What about it?"

"Somebody beat me to it. He's dead. Strangled."

He paused, hearing Logan's quick curse before he went on. "He held out on you last night. The killer got caught and knew Tilden could pin it on him. He bought the kid off until today. So maybe somebody came to see Alma between the time Bronson came and George Avery got there. Maybe you want to have a talk with Fiske like I told you."

Logan tried to break in but Casey cut him off. "Or maybe you're just going to keep on being stubborn about Bronson."

He hung up without waiting for an answer. He went outside. It was a crisp cold day with a lot of sunshine, and some kids were playing marbles on the sidewalk. Casey did not see them, nor was he aware of the sunshine. In his mind everything was gloom and depression because he knew there was someone else he had to see.

**E**DITH ROBERTS wore a green woolen dress with a narrow belt about her waist. The moment she opened the door, Casey noticed the redness of her eyes and the stamp of weariness upon her pale young face.

"Flash," she said, and stood back to let him enter.

"Hi, Edith," Casey said, keeping his voice casual in a hearty sort of way. "I stopped in at Pinelli's and they said you wouldn't be down until later."

"I was just going," Edith Roberts said.

Casey perched on the edge of a straight-backed chair. She sat down opposite him, and then the silence began to pile up between them. Casey

dangled his hat between his knees, aware that her eyes were avoiding him. Presently he cleared his throat and went ahead.

"Where's Lew?"

She looked at him then, and although she made no sound he got the impression of some inward gasp. Quick alarm touched her glance and passed across her face. It took her a second or two to get things under control. Then she forced a smile and gestured idly.

"Why I—I don't know."

"The cops question you?"

"Yes."

"Then you know what happened last night." She nodded silently and he went on. "Something happened this afternoon too," he said and told her about Henry Tilden.

By the time he finished her face was chalky and her hands were white-knuckled in her lap.

"Lew didn't do it," she said weakly.

"Where is he?" Casey demanded.

"How—how would I know?"

"Call it a hunch," Casey said. "You're in love with him. Maybe he knows that and maybe he doesn't, but one thing he's sure of—you're for him. He can count on you. Probably you're the only one he can. When you were down and out, he got you a job."

"Yes," Edith Roberts said, not looking at him. "Four years ago. I thought I could sing. I found out I couldn't, but I didn't find it out until almost too late. I had less than a dollar left when I went in the Club Marseilles that afternoon. No one was there but Lew. He was playing the piano and I walked up to him. I sang for him and he listened.

He was too kind to tell me I was no good, so he arranged for an audition at WBZ that same afternoon. The man there told me the truth and—"

She broke off. Her eyes came up to Casey but she didn't see him. She was looking beyond him at something a long way off.

"But you know all about that," she said, "and how he got me the job as cashier for Joe Phinney."

"Yeah," Casey said, and found an odd thickness in his throat, an uncomfortable warmth in his cheeks. He went ahead bluntly.

"Look, Edith. Don't kid yourself about the cops. They'll find him, and when they do they'll drag him down to headquarters. I don't think he killed Alma, but what I think doesn't matter unless we can get some proof. I want to talk to him first."

He scowled at her to overcome the lingering thickness in his throat. "What do you think I'm horning in on this for anyway? Lew's nothing to me. But I got mixed up in it last night—" He broke off before he told about the gun he'd found, and tried another tack. "And I got gypped out of some pictures. I'm gonna get some to take their place and if I happen to help Lew that's O.K. too."

"No, Flash." She was smiling faintly now, her eyes accusing him. "That's not it. It's for me, isn't it, Flash? Because we've been friends. And I've lied for you to that city editor of yours to cover up for you sometimes. You give me a lift home at night when you're around, and you've always given me some little present for Christmas, and

when you were sick I sent you some fruit. That's the reason, isn't it, Flash?"

Casey got red and for an instant floundered awkwardly, not admitting the truth because it really hadn't occurred to him until now that this, after all, was what had first troubled him. But there was more to it than that now. Since the death of Tilden there was another and more pressing reason, but he did not want to tell her lest he be wrong and alarm her unnecessarily.

"That's got nothing to do with it," he said. "You know where he is."

"Yes," Edith Roberts said quietly. "And you know how I feel about him. He trusted me. I can't tell you, Flash."

"Oh, yes you can."

"I promised."

Casey rose and pulled the pearl-handled .32 from his pocket. Quickly and directly he told her all about it, seeing the stiffness come about her mouth and the sickness in her eyes. When he had finished he knew there was but one more thing he could do. Hating himself, not daring to look at her, he started for the telephone, talking fast.

"O.K.," he said. "Then I have to call the lieutenant. I'm in a spot for covering up this much. I'm not going to make it worse."

"Flash!" Edith Roberts said, her voice tortured.

He was at the telephone now. He kept on talking.

"Maybe if I come clean I can talk myself out of this jam, but I can't hold out any longer if you're not going to play ball with me." He turned, the instrument in his hand.

"What's the matter with you?" he demanded. "You think I'll cross you up? You think I'll turn him in if—"

"He's at the Hotel Albert, room 424." She got the words out before she choked up and buried her face in her hands.

Casey went over to her, his face moist with self-reproach as he saw the wracking shudders pass through her shoulders. Her sobs stabbed at him and he stared down at her wretchedly, swallowing to clear his throat, and then not finding anything he could say. In the end he clamped on his hat and put his hand on her shoulder, pressing it briefly before he went on.

## CHAPTER FOUR

THE HOTEL ALBERT was a five-story antique near the railroad yards. There was a water tower on the roof across which was printed in white: *Rooms—One Dollar A Day Up.* It was that kind of hotel: the lobby had a tiled door, the furniture was done in black leather, cracked and worn, and the cuspidors were battered and lusterless.

Casey rode up in a rickety elevator and went down the hall to room 424. He knocked loudly, knocked again. Presently a voice answered and he said: "Open up, It's Casey."

A bolt clicked back and the door inched open. Casey gave it a push, knocking Lew Bronson back a bit, and went in.

"Edith told you!"

Bronson's voice was husky. He backed against the door, jaw sagging. His vest was unbuttoned, his shirt soiled and open at the throat.

"She told you," he said again and wet his lips.

"She had to."

"What'd you do to her?"

There was a wild, hunted look in the man's eyes now, and his hands trembled as he moved away from the door. He reached for Casey and the photographer pushed him back in a chair.

"I showed her this," he said and tossed the revolver on the table. "I got sick of carrying it around for you. I told her she'd tell or I'd call Logan."

There was a pint bottle of whiskey, half empty, near the gun, and Casey picked it up and pocketed it. "I ought to break your damn neck," he said. "You've got a girl like Edith pulling for you all the way, but it ain't enough, huh? Even in prison she was for you. Wrote you sometimes, didn't she? And sent you magazines and cigarettes."

"Yes." Bronson had slumped in the chair now, his eyes downcast. "Yes," he said miserably. "She used to bring me stuff to eat, too."

"So you have to go chasing back to Alma."

"I didn't," Bronson said. "That was all over. I knew that when I was in stir, when she married Avery. I had a lot of time to think about her—and Edith—and lots of things. I—"

"You went back there last night."

"To tell her off, Flash. That's all. I knew how it was with Edith, but I had to wipe some things out of my mind. I didn't have the guts at first, and then last night I decided I would. I went up and told her what I thought. Oh, I guess it was a dumb thing to do, but I

had it in the back of my head and I had to do it so I could feel that was all over and I could start clean."

His voice trailed off and Casey said: "Well, what happened?"

"Someone rang the buzzer. She'd tried to stall me off when I came and I knew she was expecting someone. She pushed me out the back way—only I didn't go out. I waited in the kitchen." His voice was low now, faraway. "After a while I heard a shot. So then I went back in—"

"You know who did the shooting, too," Casey said.

Bronson's gaze jerked up and something flickered in his eyes. Then he pulled them back and was talking again.

"No. I only heard the shot. I went back in and she was on the floor. The gun was there. It was hers. I remembered it."

"What did you pick it up for?"

"I don't know."

CASEY DID not believe this but he did not press the point because he was thinking of something else. The thing the examiner's physician had said about the angle of the slug and the close-up shot. It had been Alma who had pulled the gun, and killer had grabbed her wrist and turned it back on her body and pulled the trigger. And she had taken out that gun because she'd been afraid of her life.

"How long do you think you can duck the cops?" he asked abruptly.

"I don't know."

"You know damn well it won't be long," Casey said. "Because they're go-

ing to try a little harder now." He went on to explain about Tilden's testimony and what had happened to him.

Bronson's face was pasty now and his lips were dry again.

"I didn't do it, Flash," he breathed. "I ain't been out of this room."

"I believe that part," Casey said. "But you know what you've got to do, don't you? You've got to turn yourself in."

Bronson sat up, his mouth stiff. "No! Who'd believe me?"

"Who cares? Down there you've got a chance. Stay here and you're a dead turkey. Not that I give a damn. For my dough you're a louse, Lew. Just for taking the brush-offs from Alma you're a louse. But—" he shook his head disgustedly—"women are funny. Edith thinks you're it. I want to do what I can and I want to be damn sure nothing happens to her."

"But—" Bronson swallowed and a look of puzzlement twisted his thin face. "Nothing'll happen to her."

"No?" said Casey. "Don't be dumb. The cops are looking for you because they know you were in Alma's apartment about the time she got knocked off. Don't you think the killer knows that by now?"

"Oh," said Bronson slowly.

"Yeah," said Casey. "The killer made a deal with Tilden, as the only way out, knowing at the time he'd have to knock off the kid the first chance he got, to be sure the kid didn't change his mind. He got the chance today. That's two down, huh? And he knows you were at Alma's—maybe while he was there. He's got nothing more to lose and he's not going to take a chance on you either

—not if he can cool you off before the cops get you."

Casey went over to the window and looked out, his thick face troubled. "Go on, get your coat and tie on. There's a guy looking for you right now. Sooner or later he's going to figure maybe Edith knows where you are, just like I did. Only it'll be different then. I *talked* her out of your address. What do you think he'll do?"

He stood there for another moment scowling darkly at the airshaft outside the window. Then, not hearing any sound of movement behind him, he turned and looked smack into the muzzle of the revolver.

Lew Bronson stood behind the table, his jaw taut and his mouth a thin hard line. There was no indecision about him now, and that gun was steady in his hand.

"Thanks, Flash," he said. "For telling me about it and bringing the rod."

Casey began to curse. "Put it down," he said and started slowly forward.

Bronson backed up carefully. He moved along to a door and opened it, revealing a closet. He began to circle away from it.

"Inside," he said.

Casey stopped, brows bent and his eyes ugly. "You're not going to shoot," he said.

Bronson's voice was thin and metallic.

"Inside, Flash, or I'll have to let you have it in the leg."

Casey hesitated and things tightened up within him. A curious tingling ran along his nerve ends, and sweat crept out along his hair line. Hearing Bronson's voice, seeing that hot bright look

in his eyes, he suddenly knew that the man meant just what he said.

"I'm going out," Bronson said. "Nothing's going to happen to Edith."

Then Casey had his answer. Bronson *did* know who had murdered Alma Sinclair.

"Tell Logan, you crazy fool," he said. "You can't do this alone."

"Logan wouldn't believe me," Bronson said. "Why should he? I've got no witnesses, nothing to back me up." He paused, took a breath, and Casey saw the hand tighten on the gun. "I've got no more time," Bronson said. "Do you take one in the leg and have me tie you up or do you—"

**H**E DIDN'T finish because Casey was already walking toward the closet. He knew the odds now, Casey did. And he was no fool. He could probably bust out of the closet. He could call Logan and maybe head off Bronson at Barney Fiske's place.

He stepped in the closet and faced the wall.

"Shut the door," Bronson said, moving up. "And don't try anything, Flash."

Casey pulled the door shut and almost at once the bolt clicked, locking him in. He waited until he was sure Bronson had gone before he began to test the door panels with his shoulder.

Just how long Casey banged away at that door he was never sure, but he kept it up until he had to stop and get his breath. Then he thought of another method and drew back against the wall, slamming the panel with his heel. Presently he heard the wood splinter. A few more blows made an opening and

### Once Around the Clock

he widened it with his fist, then reached through and twisted the key.

He kicked the door open and stepped out, puffing from exertion and mumbling to himself, so busy with his own resentment that he took two steps before he saw the man. The rest of his impression remained forever confused.

The first glance startled him, and then something in the fellow's eyes, some quick thrust of intuition, told him that the man was not alone, that there was another here who, hearing his efforts break out of the closet, had been waiting for him beside the door.

He had time for that one impression, that was all. There was a faint sound of movement beside him and before he could turn his head or duck away, something crashed against his skull and the light went out and he felt himself falling.

The hat he wore probably saved him a fractured skull, and the jar when he hit the floor helped bring back consciousness temporarily lost. Then he was stretched on his face, and over the roar inside his head and the queer sickness at the pit of his stomach, his brain began to work again, battling the instinct that prompted him to get up, telling him to lie still.

"Is he out?" a voice said.

"Colder'n a fish. I really hung that one on."

Casey kept his eyes closed and waited. Gradually his strength came back and his head cleared.

"The little guy must've lammed," the first voice said. "Now what do we do, Morrie?"

"Call up, dope."

There was a pause. Then the first man asked for a telephone number: Regis 8527. Presently he said quickly: "Look, this Bronson ain't here . . . Yeah, but wait," he said and went on to explain about Casey. "I don't know who he is," he said finally. "Yeah. O.K. That place we rented this morning on Spicer Street? O.K."

There was the click of a receiver. "Let's blow," the man said.

"What about our pal, here?"

"Leave him."

"I'd better tap him again, huh?"

Casey opened his lids slightly and looked through his lashes, his range of vision low along the floor. He watched patent leather shoes stop beside one arm, sensed that Morrie was bending down. Then, moving only that arm, he clamped one hand on a skinny ankle and yanked viciously.

Morrie yelled and came down in one lump, hitting the floor on the back of his head, the gun in his hand dropping scarcely two feet away. Casey kept right on moving, coming to one knee even as he yanked, lunging past the heap that was Morrie and scooping up the automatic, rolling over and coming up on elbows and knees to angle the gun at the man by the window.

This worthy had his hand across his chest, eyes wide and a gun butt gleaming from beneath his lapel. He froze just that way.

"Let go of it," Casey said.

**T**HE MAN did and Casey stood up. With his toe he rolled Morrie over and saw that he was still unconscious. Then he moved over to the squat man,

seeing now the flat and twisted nose, realizing the fellow was a complete stranger. He went around behind him and got his gun, looked the room over, noticing the three lamps and the ample supply of electric cord connecting them.

Directing the fellow to rip this cord free, he bound Morrie's wrists behind his back and secured his ankles, then lifted the bed, putting one of the posts between the man's legs to anchor him. He was just getting ready for the flat-nosed fellow when the phone rang. With one eye on his prisoner, he answered it.

It was Edith Roberts.

Relief streaked through him at the sound of her voice and he answered her queries with quick assurance. No, Lew wasn't here, he'd just stepped out. Yes, everything was all right.

"Oh, I'm so glad," the girl said. "I thought—"

"What about you?" Casey cut in.

The story came reluctantly but in the end it was quite clear. When Casey hung up, his face was grim and the anger burning inside him smoldered in his eyes. The two thugs had cuffed her around until she had been forced to tell where Bronson was hiding. She had done this, she said, because she had hoped that when the two left she could telephone Lew and warn him. Instead of that she had been left gagged and bound and had only now been able to work herself free and make it to the telephone.

Flatnose must have seen the danger glints in Casey's eyes, the tightness of his lips. He took a step backward, although nothing was said, and was

pressed against the wall when the photographer came up.

"Now wait a minute," the man said pleadingly.

"Kicked her around, huh?"

"We didn't hurt her. We just—"

Casey feinted a blow with the gun. The man ducked and Casey caught him flush on the chin with a hard left hook that jarred him clear to the shoulder. The man went down, and whether he was out or not, he lay still.

"Why should I waste time with guys like you?" Casey said, half aloud. "I can do it easier this way."

He put the gun away, took the remaining light cord and treated Flatnose the same way he had Morrie, looping one piece of the cord around the leg of the radiator. Picking up the telephone again, he spent two minutes in argument that was consistently forceful and sometimes profane. When he hung up he had the address of the number listed as Regis 8527.

THE SIGN on the frosted glass panel said *The Keeler Company*, and Casey stood looking at it a moment, making up his mind. That the address of Regis 8527 should be a room on the third floor of a second-rate office building like this had upset his calculations. His original intention when he had been locked in the closet, to telephone Logan, had been discarded the moment he had been given this address. Unless this was some blind of Barney Fiske's, the set-up did not make sense. Still, this was the address.

He grunted softly and opened the door, finding himself in a moderate-

sized anteroom presided over by a hard-eyed young man who sat behind a desk next to a door leading to some room beyond. Casey went up to the desk.

"Where's Lew Bronson?"

The man behind the desk, who had followed the big photographer's progress suspiciously, but without moving, made his eyes a little narrower.

"Who the hell're you?"

"Casey," said Casey. "Where's Bronson?"

"Never heard of him."

"Where's your boss? Inside?"

"What's it to you, chum?"

"I'd like to see him," Casey said, and started for the door.

The fellow jumped up, yanking at a desk drawer. Casey saw the gleam of the gun barrel. When it flashed up, he slapped hard at the wrist, knocking the gun out of the man's hand and pulling him from behind the desk. The fellow stumbled, trying to swing his right, then had his feet kicked out from under him and went down hard.

Casey picked up the gun, put his hand in the collar of the man's coat and hoisted him to his feet, pushing him roughly toward the door to the inner office.

"Let's go in," he said. "You first."

The fellow opened the door and stepped in, not looking around. The room, larger than the first, was sparsely furnished with a large desk, two or three chairs and some ash trays. There were no filing cabinets, no typewriter, nothing to suggest that it was greatly used, and Casey knew he had been right about one thing. This office was simply an address and phone number

for the use of someone whose main business was somewhere else.

There was a door in one corner and he eyed it narrowly. "What's in there?"

"A closet," the man said sullenly.

"Open it," said Casey and when his command was obeyed, he saw the cubby beyond was a combination closet and washroom.

By the time he had returned to the anteroom, anxiety had fastened firmly upon Casey's thoughts. This was the number the two thugs had called. The man who had sent them had been here at that time. Suppose Bronson had walked in here and been trapped? Suppose he had been hurried out after the two thugs had phoned? Suddenly Casey remembered something else and confronted the hard-eyed youth who watched him hatefully.

"What's that number on Spicer Street?"

Even as he spoke, he knew what he was up against. The quick recoil of the youth's eyes told him that he was right, but he saw the leer, the hardening of the mouth, and knew it would take a long time to make this fellow speak. And now time was the all important factor. If Lew Bronson had been taken to that Spicer Street address he had been taken there for one reason. . . .

The thing that made up Casey's mind was his knowledge of the city. Spicer Street was a one-block, dead-end affair. It might be quicker to find the right place once he was there, than by trying to get anything out of this tough youth.

"O.K.," he said abruptly, and broke the revolver, shaking out the shells. He

threw the gun in the waste basket and went out.

## CHAPTER FIVE

**E**VEN IN daylight Spicer Street was discouraging. Put there by some ambitious landholder with the help of a lenient planning board, it ended in the blank wall of a movie house and was lined by grimy brick structures—two family houses and small tenement-like apartments.

But Casey saw none of this. What he saw with a quick lift of hope was the four smutty-nosed urchins who played in the street with a home-made baseball and a piece of doweling for a bat. He braked his car beside them, got out and stood watching the game.

The ball game stopped. The players looked at him and he looked back, taking a half dollar from his pocket and spinning it in the air.

"See a couple of men go in one of these houses in the last few minutes?"

"Three guys," one boy said. "That's their car, mister."

A hundred feet away a nondescript sedan stood in front of a three story apartment. Casey tossed the coin towards his informer. "O.K., pal. Go buy yourselves a bat."

Casey got out his camera and plate-case. By the time he reached the apartment, a stoop-shouldered Italian with swooping mustaches had begun to sweep down the steps.

"You the boss here?" Casey asked. The man said he was and Casey said: "Rented an apartment this morning, didn't you?"

"Sure."

"Which one?"

"Number Three D."

Casey had the fellow by the arm and was pulling him back in the hall. "You got a phone here?"

"Sure. Back there." The man, a little bewildered now and blinking fast, gestured toward the rear of the hall.

Casey took out a coin and pressed it in a calloused palm.

"Get this," he said. "I'm from police headquarters. I want you to phone for me. Ask for Lieutenant Logan. Get it? Logan. Tell him that Casey says he's to come here just as fast as he can. Got that? As fast as he can. To Apartment Three D."

He shoved the man toward the telephone and started up the bare stairs on a run, knowing that while it might have been better to make the call himself he did not dare to take the time. There could only be one answer to a layout such as this. Two thugs hiring this out-of-the-way apartment that morning, being told to come here now—if Lew Bronson had been brought here it was to be murdered.

Going down the narrow third-floor hall, Casey made up his mind. If three men had come, two of them would be armed, and his job now was to stall, to prevent any shooting until Logan could get there. Of the guns he had taken from the two thugs he left one in his coat pocket as a decoy, and tucked the other inside his belt. At the unpainted door, he knocked loudly, and presently a voice said: "Who is it?"

"Casey."

There was a pause and Casey waited,

feeling his pulse quicken and the prickling of his scalp. They'd let him in, all right. They'd have to now. They'd have to find out how he had trailed them here. . . . The lock clicked and the door opened swiftly, presenting a tall, lean man with a tight mouth and a pointed chin.

"Come on," he ordered, and Casey saw the heavy automatic in his hand and stepped in the room.

Right in the middle of it, the pearl-handled .32 leveled, was George Avery. Seeing him, Casey stopped and stared, and something cold curled about his ankles and crept up the back of his legs.

"You, huh?" he said finally, and turned and saw Lew Bronson in one corner, his hands at his side, his thin face abject and hopeless.

Casey heard the door close behind him. He put down his plate-case and tried to look unconcerned while his brain battled the rush of new and confusing thoughts.

"Was I wrong?" he said finally. "I thought Barney Fiske was the guy who did it."

"Search him, Al," Avery said.

The tall man came up behind him and Casey felt a hand slap his clothing. The gun in his pocket was removed and Al stepped back.

"Make it clean," Avery said.

Casey held his breath and Al resumed his search, his fingers exploring until they found the gun in Casey's waistband.

"Hah!" George Avery said. "You were kind of loaded with artillery, weren't you?"

CASEY MASKED his disappointment with a grin, telling himself that it didn't matter. Logan would be here in another ten minutes and he should be able to stall that long. The thing to do was make believe that he wasn't worried and that time was unimportant. He started in at once.

"I don't get it," he said. "Why should you kill Alma?"

"It's a long story," Avery said.

"I didn't get it either," Bronson said, "until last night." There was a cutting bitterness in his voice.

Casey eyed him resentfully. "You had to run out, huh? You knew it was Avery but you had to do it your way."

"Would Logan believe me?" Bronson asked. "I go up to Alma's and stay out back while the shooting happens. I come back and pick up the gun. I know I'm in a spot but I figure if I can have it out with him—" he glared at Avery—"and hand him in to the cops I might be O.K. That's why I took the rod, but—then I lost my nerve. I stopped in Pinelli's and had a couple, and then a couple more, and then it was too late. No guts, that was my trouble, Flash."

He paused and his voice thinned out. "Then, this afternoon when I found out what the score was, I knew I had to do it. The only guy who could clear me—the operator—was dead. Nobody could ever prove Avery'd been up to Alma's. But I had been, sure. I had been and the cops knew it." He snorted savagely. "What chance would I have had? But I knew about that phoney office and I went down. If it hadn't been for him—"

He broke off and stared at Al. There was a second or two of silence and Casey spoke up to keep things going before Avery got restless.

"Maybe you killed Phinney too, huh?" he said, guessing aloud.

"Sure he killed Phinney," Bronson said. "Did they play me for the sap. You know what I thought had happened, don't you?"

"That Alma killed him," Casey said. "That story got around. Alma killed him and cried on your shoulder and you took the rap."

"Yeah," Bronson said. "That's it. That's what I thought. She conned me into it. Big-hearted Lew. I was so nuts about her then I couldn't think straight. Sure. I told her I could do the rap standing on my head. And then last night I got it right—while they were fighting in the front room. It was almost the same kind of set-up when Phinney got his. Only instead of me listening in it was Alma that time.

"She was at Phinney's place that night, all right, and Avery came up and she went in another room. And Avery plugged him because Avery was the lawyer for the laundry boys and he had charge of a lot of their funds. Phinney was treasurer but he'd let Avery handle—"

"Oh," Casey said slowly. "I guess I get it now. Joe Phinney, the organizer of the laundry workers, the secretary-treasurer. And a shortage had been discovered after his death—only it was Avery's shortage, and now Avery was the big shot. You married her sort of quick, didn't you, George? So she wouldn't get ideas about squealing. But

you couldn't keep her satisfied. She divorced you and you gave her a nice settlement, but it wasn't enough. She was raising the ante on you again, huh? And as long as she was alive she could—"

"That's close enough," Avery said, and his voice was unusually quiet. He'd been sitting on the edge of the table by the windows and he got up. Casey plunged ahead.

"And you went there last night, not intending to kill her then, but maybe to make a date for some time when you would. But you lost your head and scared her and she pulled the gun. What did you tell that kid Tilden?"

"I told him I'd gone up and found Alma dead," Avery said. "I told him I might be under suspicion if he told the truth. I said it was worth a grand to me to keep clean. I went down to the corner for a drink and came back. That was the time to tell the cops, and then we went up and found her—officially. But to hell with that."

**H**E GLANCED down at the gun in his hand, a strong, blocky figure with a hard, muscular jaw and no pity in his deep-set eyes.

"You make it tougher, Flash. Why didn't you keep out of it?" He paused. When there was no answer he said: "How'd you know where Lew was?"

"I got it from Edith Roberts," Casey said.

Even as he spoke he regretted it. He saw the quick movement of the man's lids, the narrowing frame they made for his eyes.

"Yeah," Avery said, and sighed. "We

had better go check on her too, Al."

"No!" Lew Bronson said. "She—"

"She doesn't know anything about it," Casey said.

"How do I know?" Avery said. "You talked to her. So did Lew."

"You're crazy," Casey said. "I got my dope from two punks of yours."

"What about them?"

Casey told him and Avery smiled sardonically.

"You did all right, Flash. O.K., Al. Go to the Albert first." He grunted softly. "I wondered what held them up. Get 'em. Then go get the girl."

"No," Bronson said again.

"I'm in too deep to go soft now," Avery said. "Go ahead, Al and—" his glance touched Casey's plate-case—"take that thing with you. Get rid of it some place."

As Al started for the door, Lew Bronson pushed away from the wall. "Leave her out of it, Avery."

Al hesitated, looking from Avery to Bronson.

Avery's gun moved up to corner Bronson and again he ordered Al from the room. The fellow picked up the plate-case and opened the door.

For that one instant Casey nearly told about Logan, but he caught himself in time, knowing that to mention that fact now would make Avery shoot at once. He heard the door close behind him. Then some movement pulled at the corner of his eye and he saw that Bronson had taken another step.

"Hold it, Lew!" Avery said.

Bronson stopped. He was about ten feet from the gun. He had no chance of reaching it and yet.... . Sweat began

to leak down Casey's back but underneath his spine was cold and stiff. Suddenly he knew that Lew Bronson was going to try and in that same moment a curious reaction came over him.

He saw clearly now a lot of things that he had been too dumb to analyze. Lew Bronson had run out on him and come gunning for Avery because he realized the danger to Edith Roberts. Now, knowing there was nothing left for him but death, he was going to try again to keep her safe. His number was up, he must know it. He must know also that should he reach Avery in time, Casey would be left to telephone Edith Roberts and warn her.

Casey's hands were wet now and his mouth was dry. And this was the man he'd called a louse, for no reason except that he had loved a woman once, blindly and with little hope of reward. This was the man who had stood trial for a murder he did not commit and who, all his life, had been kicked around and double-crossed with never a complaint.

But courage was in him now. Casey found it in his eyes and written across the thin white face as he took another slow step toward the gun. Seeing all these things so clearly now, Casey was ashamed and knew that, somehow, Bronson should not be left to fight alone.

"Hold it!" Avery said again. "You're going to get it, Lew."

Casey's hand moved to his pocket.

"You too, Casey, if you make another move."

"I got a bottle in my pocket," Casey said, trying to keep his voice indiffer-

ent. "I'm just getting it out. I need a drink."

**S**LOWLY, DELIBERATELY, he slid his hand around the bottle and pulled it out. Bronson had stopped about eight feet from the gun. Casey uncorked the bottle, seeing the ready set of Avery's shoulders, the tightness of his hand on the pearl-handled revolver. He saw, too, the guns that had been taken from him and were now on the table in back of Avery.

He took a swallow and the whiskey burned his throat. He lowered the bottle, measuring distances, and then, before he could move, Bronson started.

With a sudden, half-choked cry, he lunged forward, hands outstretched. Avery fired instantly, the gun bucking in his hand and the roar of it shaking the room.

Bronson's torso jerked with the impact of the slug and he stumbled. As he went down, Casey threw the bottle, not at Avery's head, but at his wrist, watching it turn in the air as he followed it up, seeing the whiskey spurt from the neck until it smashed against Avery's forearm.

The gun went spinning and Avery wheeled and grabbed for one of the automatics on the table. Casey took a step and lunged, going off balance and to his knees, stretching, straight-arming Avery as he fell, knocking the man down—but not in time. Avery had grabbed a gun as he went over.

It was all finished in another three seconds, but for Casey the sequence was clearcut and distinct. He saw Avery roll away and come to his knees

with cat-like quickness. He got his own hands under him and pushed off the floor like a sprinter, seeing the muzzle of the gun level down, ducking his head instinctively to protect his face, knowing even then that his awkward, scrambling dive would fall short.

The gun blasted as he ducked and he groped for it, not realizing that he had not been hit until his hands found Avery and, with driving feet, he fell over on top of the man. Only then did he see that there was no resistance to his charge, no movement now in the body beneath his own. Only then did he know that the gun he had heard had not been Avery's.

Incredulous, shaking all over from exertion and reaction, he stood up. There was a tiny red-rimmed hole just over Avery's right eye. He turned. Bronson was propped on knees and one arm. In the other hand he had the pearl-handled .32. As Casey stared, he got himself to a sitting position and put the gun on the floor.

"Thanks, Lew," Casey said huskily. "I guess—"

"Call Edith," Bronson said. "Never mind me, Flash."

Casey hesitated and just then he heard the screech of automobile brakes followed by shouts. He went to the window, threw it open and looked down. A police car stood at the curb. On the sidewalk was his plate-case. Beside it, arms upraised, was Al, and surrounding him were Logan, Manahan and two plainclothes men.

Casey let his breath come out, realizing now that all this had happened in that minute or so since Al had left the

room. Relief brought a curious weakness to his body, and he said huskily: "It's all O.K., Lew."

"But—"

"Logan and the boys. They got our friend Al."

"Logan?" Bronson said.

"Yeah," Casey said, and explained what he had done before he came upstairs. As he talked he dropped to one knee beside Bronson. "How is it, Lew? Bad?"

Bronson shook his head and smiled weakly. He put his hand inside his coat and held his chest.

"No," he said. "He was high with that one. I'll be O.K. And look, Flash, will you tell Edith? Tell her I'm all right."

"Sure," Casey said and the cords in his neck tightened again. He looked away and stood up, a burly, shame-faced figure with a broad, sweat-streaked face and pity and compassion in his eyes.

"Sure," he said, turning toward the door. "But the time they dig that slug out of you, she'll probably be waiting with her arms full of flowers."

"Yeah," Lew said. His voice was low and remote but there was a curious smile on his face. "I bet she will at that."

THE CLOCK atop the cash register pointed to five minutes of twelve when Casey pushed his plate-case against the bar front and climbed on a stool. Gus, the bartender, pushed a bottle toward him.

"You're late," he said.

"Yeah." Casey poured a drink.

downed it, poured another and dumped in the soda. "Boy, what a job!"

"Ahh—" scoffed Gus.

Casey bristled. "Listen, if you'd been through what I've been through—"

"Sure, I know," Gus said. "Up half the night on a fire or a murder or something." He shrugged. "You eat it."

Casey opened his mouth to protest resentfully and then checked himself. Somehow, in spite of his weariness, he felt good—and it wasn't just from the whiskey he had drunk, either.

Until now he hadn't had a minute's rest, what with the police investigation and seeing Edith Roberts and then going to the hospital to see Bronson. He'd just now come from there, and he still remembered the way the girl had looked sitting there beside Lew.

"I repeat," said Gus, "you eat it up."

Casey's grin came slowly and he remembered other things: the pictures he'd turned in and the look on Blaine's face when he slapped them on the desk. He drained his glass and put it on the bar along with a dollar bill.

Gus rang up eighty cents and yawned, glancing at the clock as he did so. It was just midnight. "Well," he said. "Another day, another dollar."

"Yeah," said Casey. "Another day, another dollar."

He picked up his plate-case and trudged away, a burly, imperturbable figure, absorbed in thoughts that softened the lines of fatigue upon his face and left his dark eyes remote and faintly smiling. Behind him came the tinkle of two dimes in the glass beside the cash register. ♦♦♦

*Francis K. Allan's response to his first acceptance was one that gives editors gray hair. He hopped a bus from his native Texas, rented a room and a typewriter in New York, and told the publishing world, "Here I am!" Luckily, he was the one in a million with the talent to back up such optimism. He and his wife currently live in a charming old farmhouse in New York State with their young son and some half dozen dachshunds, while he tries vainly to keep the nation's leading magazines supplied with enough of his fine detective stories.*

## Model For Death

by FRANCIS K. ALLAN



**P**HILLIP ADRIAN watched in quiet impatience as the students of his basic-sculpture class made ready to leave his studio. All were leaving, but one—and if there were wisdom and mockery in the eyes of the others, Phillip Adrian didn't mind.

As the door closed behind them, he lighted a cigarette. The studio was darkening rapidly as he left his tiny platform and moved slowly back to the girl's chair. In the twilight of the room, her eyes watched him gravely.

"You enjoyed my lecture today?" he teased quietly. He touched a gold curl of her hair. "You weren't listening," he accused

"No. No," she repeated fixedly. Suddenly his teasing smile faded. His hand in her hair tightened. He sat down beside her.

"Why? Why, Leda?"

"I can't—can't stand it any more!" she whispered harshly. She jerked her head from under his fingers and stared at the dark wall. Then softly, "I'm go-

ing away, Phillip. But this time I'm going to stay."

Phillip Adrian's lean cheeks narrowed. "You're being childish, now. Why should you run away?"

"You know why I'll go," she interrupted quietly. Then her lips had to add it, scarcely a murmur: "Serena—"

Phillip looked at the cigarette, then mashed it out. He stood up and walked to the window. It was a huge window, and the streets of New York were small far below. The lights over the Hudson were beginning to wink in the dusk.

"Only Setena?"

"Isn't that enough! She's your wife! She—" Leda caught the rushing words. "I didn't mean it that way," she corrected. "That's why I'm leaving. Before I can't leave."

When Phillip turned, she was standing behind him. Her coat was on, now; and the tiny furled hat was in her hand. She was a slender girl. Another time, her face would have been quite pretty; now it was troubled and her eyes were filmy.

"Good-by," she said quickly. One small hand came out. Phillip looked at it curiously; then he studied her face.

"I love you, Leda," he said, almost experimentally.

"Good-by, Phillip."

"You can't do it!" he accused suddenly. "If we both—"

"Don't say—" She turned abruptly and stumbled toward the door. Phillip caught her. He kissed her roughly, once, and again.

"You're not going! We'll get rid of—" He stopped, for she was strangely rigid right in his arms; her head was

tilted back, and her eyes were locked in his.

"What were you going to say?" she asked carefully. "We'll get rid of—whom?"

Slowly he let her go. He took out another cigarette.

"Nothing," he answered finally.

She moved one step back from him; another, until she was at the door.

"I have some of your material. I'll bring it back tomorrow, Phillip. I won't come back again. If we don't do it this way, something will happen—something awful to remember. I'm going to stop it now, while I can." She opened the door and stepped into the hall.

"Good-by." Quickly she turned and vanished. The door closed slowly behind her.

Phillip walked back to the window. He leaned out and watched the street twenty floors below.

AT LAST he turned. He stopped and blinked, then turned on a lamp. "Dinner ready, Serena?" he asked the woman standing there.

She didn't answer, but continued to stand, her arms loose at her sides, her stout body very still. Only her deep brown eyes seemed alive.

"Well, what is it?" His words had an edge.

"You said that you loved her." Serena's voice was touched with a Latin slur. In the lamplight, her Spanish features were recognizable; traces of a fading beauty still remained.

"I was only joking."

"You were not joking, Phillip."

"How do you know what I was do-

ing?" An anger he had not realized poured hotly through his veins. He stood up and threw away his cigarette. "Aren't you satisfied to rant about my drinking and my eating and sleeping? When did you ever begin to know what I thought!" He stood before her, his fingers clenched; his arms half-raised.

She blinked. Her eyes moved to his hands, then back to his face.

"It is twenty years since we were young in Madrid," she spoke distantly. "They are many years for me, and very few for you. That is the way with the women of my race. Too many years, too soon.... Now you are tired of me. You love this Leda, for she is young."

Serena let her eyes fall to her waist; she turned her fleshy wrists, and the silver bracelets tinkled.

"I should be angry, but I am just sad," she continued. "You are the angry one. You were always the angry one, Phillip." She smiled as one might remember the mischief of children. "When they chose my bust of St. Michael for the prize, you were angry then; so I never worked again. When I have helped you, you have been angry; though you took my advice." Then she smiled again.

"So I do not greatly mind, Phillip. It is not good to lose the love of your husband; but perhaps it is not so bad as to lose your own love. And I know . . . this Leda, she is so young; she would not understand—the way of your anger. It is better."

"But suppose," Phillip said, "that I actually wanted to leave you? Then what?"

"In my heart, there is no leaving,"

she answered quietly. "There is only death." Her eyes searched his.

"The dinner is ready," she said.

It was almost dawn when Phillip left his bed. He stood by the window and then turned, facing the room. He could see Serena's figure beneath the covers of her bed.

Old, he thought for a countless time. Old, and I am still young. . . . And Leda is going away.

The river was silver in the distance, and the streets below were dark. It was chilly at the window; he trembled.

There is no leaving. . . . There is only death. . . .

Phillip stood very still by the window. Thinking.

The class would come at four. They were eating lunch when he told her: "I'm not going to lecture today, Serena."

"No?"

"I'm tired of lecturing. I'll give a demonstration today. Something simple. I—I might do a life mask," he decided.

Serena looked at him and he focused his eyes on his plate. He heard her put down her fork.

"You will want me to model?" she asked softly.

"You always do. Why not today?" His voice was sharp.

She did not answer directly. Her bracelets tinkled as she moved her hands. "There is no reason," she finally said.

He glanced at her. Just in the instant, he felt a sharp fear. She knew!

But she could not know. They had done it a hundred times.

Abruptly she rose.

"You're not through with lunch," he reminded her.

"I am not hungry." She started toward the bedroom.

"Will you make the explanation sheets for the class this afternoon? We'll need twelve. Use the old form; you'll find one in my desk somewhere, titled: 'Instructions on the Life Mask.'"

"I—I will make them." She closed the door behind her.

Phillip looked at his food. He was not hungry, either. He rose and prowled about the studio. Then he remembered. He should get it now.

He put on his hat and went down the hall to the elevator. When he returned, he had the chloroform.

**A**T TEN minutes after four the twelve members of the class were assembled. Leda was there in her usual place; the little furled hat was in her lap. She didn't look up at him.

"I am departing from my schedule today," he announced. "In place of the lecture on 'Granite as a Material,' I'm going to give a demonstration of making a life mask. These sheets I will hand out explain step by step what I am doing, and why. You may follow the explanation as you watch my work."

He took the little pages Serena had prepared and passed them out. As he gave Leda hers, their eyes met. He started to speak. Instead he walked back to the front of the room. He was ready for Serena. He called. Presently she came.

She looked first at him, and then at the class; finally her gaze settled on

just one student — youthful Leda.

"I'm ready to begin," he whispered.

She turned back to him. She looked at the couch where she would lie while he worked. Then a last time she looked at him. Her eyes were deep and strange. Only once had he seen them that way. Only once. He tried to remember.

He did remember. It had been when they were married, in Madrid twenty years ago. Her eyes had been like that then; and she had said something.

He then remembered what she had said. "I love you, Phillip. I am very near to God."

"I'm ready!" The whisper was scarcely audible.

Serena lay on the couch on her back. She closed her eyes and folded her hands together. She smoothed her face, that the mask might reveal few wrinkles.

Phillip turned to the plaster of paris. Then he recalled: the oil first, to keep the mask from sticking.

"We begin with the oil. Certain greases can also be used," he explained loudly. "The face is covered with a thin film of whatever application you choose. This prevents the plaster from sticking when the mask is dry and ready for removal."

As he poured oil into his hands and began to massage Serena's face, his eyes wandered to the class. Every eye was intent upon him. There were no smiles.

"When the face is properly prepared, you then apply the plaster. The usual mistake is in covering the face too heavily. A thin covering reveals the features more truly."

He heaped the first soft mass on Se-

rena's forehead and spread it down her cheeks to the sides of her nostrils. He moved in closer, so that the fumes of the chloroform in the plaster would not be dissipated. The smell of plaster and the oil was strong—stronger than the chloroform odor.

"When the face is properly prepared, you can apply—" He stopped abruptly. He'd already said that. He swallowed.

"A great deal of plaster must be used," he corrected. "But not too much. I mean, a thin layer is better than a thin—a thick layer. It shows the features." He swallowed again and looked at the class.

Each student appeared to be on the edge of his chair. Mouths were open; eyes were wide. He looked at Leda.

She was not watching him. He followed her gaze to Serena's hands. They were folded; and yet so strangely folded. He could not understand.

Then he felt her relax beneath his fingers. Now she was asleep. . . . Now to cover the nostrils.

He spilled a handful of the plaster as he transferred it to her face. Clumsily he spread it on.

*I've got to do better. . . . I've got to do a good job. . . .*

His fingers slipped the plaster into Serena's nostrils. Quickly he packed it there. He covered her lips as he should.

"The entire face is covered," he talked on, "and the more delicate molding is done. The eyes are quite important; eventually one develops a sensitive touch for his material. I do not expect you to learn all there is to know in one—lesson."

He stopped abruptly. It was good.

Good enough. Through the thin coating of plaster, the placid image of Serena was revealed.

One might have thought she was sleeping.

Sleeping with a beauty mask, Phillip thought strangely.

He looked at his watch. Another minute or two.

"Now we leave the plaster to harden," he continued. "Meanwhile, are there questions?"

No one spoke. Someone breathed harshly. It was Leda. She was almost standing, staring. He could see the pulse in her throat.

"No questions?" Phillip blinked. He fumbled for a cigarette. He looked at his watch again. Another minute. Then he would have to hurry.

He took several hard drags. There was still no sound; only the deafening silence of waiting.

"We'll remove the mask now," he decided abruptly. "If our materials and work were good, it will not crack. We will have a true likeness in plaster of the face."

**H**E LIFTED the mask carefully. It came off perfectly. And carefully he laid it aside. He swallowed and took a deep breath. Now. . . .

"I'm through, Serena," he said. His voice seemed very loud to him. She didn't move.

"Serena—" He shook her shoulder. "You can get up now." She still remained motionless.

"Oh, Lord!" A voice screamed. It was Leda's.

— "She's—dead!" a boy exploded.

Phillip couldn't speak. He couldn't look at them. He could only stare at Serena's tranquil image, so quiet in death.

"Get—get a doctor!" he choked at last. "Something's wrong! Her heart! the heat of the mask! She—get the doctor!" he raged.

Chairs began to scrape. The dial of the telephone snipped sharply. A student gave the studio address.

Phillip knew what he had to do. Quickly.

He looked at Leda, though. Her face was pressed against her palms. She was sobbing.

Quickly he picked up the mask. In the confusion, he slipped to the kitchen and took out the small paring knife. He began to cut two tiny holes in the hardened plaster, two holes where there should have been holes already—so that Serena might have breathed.

He finished jerkily and threw the knife back in the drawer. He hurried back to the studio. The students, who were whispering, stilled when he entered. Except Leda; she continued to cry.

He couldn't go to her now. It was better to wait.

Then the doctor came, followed by another person. Phillip gasped, for with a hard, blunt realization, he knew the second man was a detective.

They both walked over to the body. The doctor touched her lightly, then shrugged. The second man pushed back his hat.

Phillip knew he had to say something.

"I'm her husband. I was making—

working up a life mask. When I removed it, she—was dead. Her heart! Often her heart—"

"Where is this mask thing?" the second man interrupted.

"Here. Right here!" Phillip handed it over. The man looked at it curiously.

"Hell of a thing to be doing," he announced sourly. "Everybody here see it?" He looked at the students. "Did she look okay when it started?"

The students stood without moving, without speaking. Then slowly their eyes focused. They focused on the little sheets of paper; in their hands, on the floor, on the chairs.

The second man demanded, "What's the matter?" His eyes followed theirs. He walked to a chair and picked up one sheet. He started to read. When he finished, he looked at Phillip.

"Who printed these?"

"She did."

"And what did you say you were making?"

"A life mask."

The man almost smiled. "She doesn't. She says it was a death mask." He handed Phillip the sheet. He stared.

#### *Instructions on the Death Mask*

It was there in Serena's rough printing. Only the one word was wrong; the instructions were for the life mask.

"It—it's a mistake! A mistake!" Phillip exclaimed. "A death mask is for a dead—"

"I know what they're for," the man said quietly. He picked up the mask again. Phillip watched his fingers. They stopped at the nostril holes. Then Phillip

lip knew the man was watching him.

"Where's the knife?"

"But—but I didn't. . . ."

"Keep him, Doc." The man took the mask. Almost lazily he wandered from the room. He was gone five minutes. When he returned, he was fitting the two tiny scraps of hard plaster back in the holes. Phillip choked.

He'd forgotten to throw them away.

Phillip backed away. Away from the man's bleak eyes. Back across the room his feet searched their way.

"I—you don't—" he whispered.

"Yeah. I call it murder. Want to tell me why?"

Phillip closed his eyes. Then opened them and looked at Leda. She was watching him. Not as she had ever watched him before. It was as though she was seeing him for the first time.

As though at last she really knew him.

He did not look at her again. He

looked at the face of Serena. He looked at her hands. Then he knew what had been so strange. They were folded—unmistakably folded in prayer.

And then he remembered her eyes that last time. He knew she hadn't meant to make that mistake about death mask. Even that last moment she had loved him; and the word on the papers had been a mistake. She had just been thinking.

No, he thought to himself again. She wouldn't have done this to me. It was just a—a terrible mistake.

Then he turned. It wasn't a very high sill. He stepped over it and into the cool space of nothing.

A scream shattered behind him, then faded swiftly above.

As he fell, he had a moment of memory. Strangely he thought of Serena's words:

"There is no leaving. There is only death. . . ."

◆◆◆

## —RUBBING IT IN—

An Oklahoma City man was arrested for reckless driving while taking his driver's test.

◆ A Paris motorcycle policeman was haled into court for violating the speed limit while chasing a motorist who was violating the speed limit.

◆ A Chicago court decided to allow an attorney to reinstate a damage suit when he explained that he wasn't able to appear in court on schedule because: 1. He was injured in an auto accident. 2. His home burned down. 3. While checking on the rebuilding of the house, a scaffolding fell on him. 4. A septic tank rigging fell on him.

◆ When a man tried to hold up Margaret Patterson in Sacramento, she just stood and laughed at him. He finally gave up and went away empty-handed.

*What happens when a man—a very human, ordinary sort of man—makes the shocking discovery that the wife he loves has never needed him? Flophouses and jails are full of answers: the bums who retreated to the lonely, futile world of the bottle; the criminals who struck back at life blindly and violently. Walt Renner might have become one of these if—but here's Robert C. Dennis to tell you, in his own powerful style, about a guy whose luckiest break came when death shared his taxi.*



## Ride a Green Hearse

by ROBERT C. DENNIS

By THE end of the sixth round his mind revolted. The fight was beginning to resemble a pig-sticking, and he wondered why he'd stayed even this long. It wasn't his turn to cover the fights—he'd come only because he couldn't stand the loneliness of the apartment. Here in the crowded stadium he was just as lonely. Maybe it was going to be like this every place, he thought with a shiver. He left quickly as the seventh round began.

He stood for a moment under the marquee. A shower had come and gone while he'd been inside, and the street shone like polished onyx. If he waited till the crowd came out, one of the boys might invite him to have a drink. That would be fine. But somebody was bound to ask about Helen.

Renner didn't think he could repeat the same old lie one more time.

"Southwest Tournament. Looks like she'll win it."

Or, as he would write it for the *Sun's* sports page, *Helen Hansen Renner Wins Tennis Crown.*

He wished he had the guts to tell them: "She's left me, she's gone for good." Just thinking the words made him sick.

The crowd was piling up at his back now—the referee must have stopped the fight—and Renner moved quickly toward the cab line. He had his hand on the door when a woman pushed against him.

"Please," she said, a little breathlessly, "which way are you going?"

"South," Renner said, "to Forty-fifth."

"Oh, that's wonderful. Can I share it? I'll pay half the fare."

Renner shrugged, held the door open for her. He had a brief indifferent glimpse of very black hair, a flash of white teeth.

He hadn't intended to go home until the girl's question prompted him to a quick answer. Home was simply a three-room apartment, filled with mementoes of Helen.

And of course there was Helen's brother, brooding over his own troubles; more than likely dead drunk.

"You don't talk very much, do you?" the dark-haired girl asked.

"No," Renner said.

"Okay, spit in my eye," she said. "I still appreciate the lift."

He'd forgotten her again by the time the cab stopped in front of his apartment building. Her voice startled him as he was paying the driver. "I go halves," she said. "That was the bar-gain!"

"It's all right," Renner said. "This is for being so unsocial."

"Thanks," she said.

He nodded, and went upstairs.

Gene was sitting in the big maroon leather chair, stupid drunk as he usually was these days. His eyes shifted apathetically to Renner, then to the empty bottle on the table. He'd run out of liquor before passing out cold. Renner wondered fleetingly if it was a woman in Gene's case too.

"I'm not staying here tonight," Renner said. "I just came back to let you know."

"Sure, Walt," Gene mumbled. "Don't blame you in th' sligh'est. I'd go too—only there's no place t' go. No place inna whole worl'."

"Take it easy," Renner said, and turned away. At the door, Gene said, "Walt," and he stopped.

"She won the Southwest." There was a note of drunken mockery in Gene's tone, but it was a companionable needling. It *was* a woman with him, Renner thought.

"She was a cinch," he said in a dry voice. "I'll send up a bottle for you to celebrate."

He detoured a block and a half to pass the corner store. The clerk, an old friend, would drop off a bottle of Old Carolina on his way home. It was almost midnight closing. Renner was walking quickly. A hundred feet from the store he saw the clerk run out into the street, his hands fluttering, his voice reedy with excitement.

"Mr. Renner—hurry. On the telephone. Your brother-in-law . . . Something's happened!"

Renner shot past him into the store. The receiver lay on the counter. "Hello—Gene?"

"Walt." Gene's voice was a sob, no longer alcoholic. "In the guts, Walt. Right in the guts. . . ."

There was a metallic, distant thud in Renner's ear, and he dropped the phone and ran out into the damp night and down the silent street toward his apartment. He ran with the terrible conviction that there was no need to hurry. . . .

Gene was on his knees in front of the maroon leather chair, his face on the seat as if he'd been in the act of saying a prayer. Perhaps he had been praying. Even the worst of us do, Renner thought dully, when murder walks up behind us.

Two bullet holes in his stomach just at the belt line—close enough to have left the powder burns on his white shirt. No gun in the room; nothing there that hadn't been there ten minutes ago. Ten minutes. . . .

Renner put the bottle of Old Carolina down on the table then and phoned the police. . . .

**I**T WAS the next morning. Lieutenant Barragar, a moderately fat man with rumpled gray hair and blank gray eyes, sat in the leather chair now. His blue suit was unpressed and he continually spilled ashes from his cigar down the front of it. He gave the impression of being a stolid, unimaginative man, but Renner wasn't deceived. He knew Barragar's mind was cold and logical behind that stolid front.

"Your wife will be in this afternoon

by plane," Barragar said casually. "I talked to her long-distance. She's taking it pretty well."

It was a fine thing, Renner thought bitterly, when a man had to hear about his wife from a cop.

"Let's run over the details again," Barragar suggested.

"I told you everything last night," Renner said irritably. "You don't think I shot him, do you?"

"Now, I didn't say that," Barragar protested. "Your story hangs together. The clerk in the store says he saw you, and the people right across the hall remember hearing something that sounded like a couple of shots about midnight. And the building manager says he didn't even know young Hansen had been staying here. So, along with all the empty whisky bottles, it adds up that he was lyin' low, just like you said last night."

"Didn't Mrs. Renner tell you anything that would help?"

Barragar looked unhappy. "She didn't know much more than that. Says he never came around here a lot."

*The same could be said for her,* Renner thought. He said, "Have you found out anything else?"

"Well, we know that Hansen did a lot of gambling, especially the Coral Club. He kept his nose clean, as far as we know, but he ran around with some pretty tough cookies. He was awfully pally with a big guy named Eddie Plank, who has a record of first-degree robbery. We haven't been able to round him up yet. But if he's our man, we'll get him."

"Sure," Renner said. He hadn't

meant to sound cynical, but Barragar looked hurt.

"I know cops always say that, but with me it's different. The newspapers usually call me a conscientious officer." He made a wry face. "Means I never know if I've done all I can to crack a case. You'd be surprised how many bright boys I nail that way," he added evenly.

He suspects me, Renner thought wearily. He wasn't indignant nor outraged at the thought. He was simply too tired to have any reaction now....

Helen arrived home about four o'clock. She looked good, Renner thought. The Arizona sun had given her a tan, her eyes were clear, though reddened just a little, and her pale blonde hair was cut rather short to keep it out of her eyes while she played. Renner, closing the door behind her, said awkwardly, "I'm sorry about Gene."

"Being sorry doesn't help much." She rubbed her temple with her fingertips. "No, I shouldn't have said that, Walt. Forgive me."

"If there is anything I can do to help. . ." It crucified him that he should love her, this woman who was his wife, and be fenced out by a transparent, immovable wall. Made of a substance unknown to science, Renner thought miserably. But atom-proof: "Maybe I could find out why he was hiding here."

Helen's strong, brown hands moved restlessly in her lap. "He didn't tell you who he was afraid of?"

"No," Renner said. "He didn't tell me anything. He was drinking quite

a bit. It happened when I was out getting him another bottle."

"Is that everything, Walt?" she persisted. "Everything you know?"

Renner just nodded. It irritated him excessively that both Helen and Barragar knew he was lying. He'd tried to convince himself that it was merely coincidence that the girl had shared his cab last night, but it was just too pat.

"You don't know how they found out he was hiding here?" Helen probed.

Renner didn't look at her at all. "No idea."

Helen sighed again and gathered up her purse and gloves. "I'm staying with some friends over on Arragon street." She fumbled in her alligator bag for something to write the phone number on. "If anything comes up, Walt, you'll let me know, won't you? Or get in touch with Lieutenant Barragar."

"Of course," Renner said shortly.

She hadn't asked him to do anything to help. Thinking about it, after she had gone, he couldn't remember a time when she had ever asked him for help. He hadn't actually realized what it was that had happened between them until now. It was this quality of self-sufficiency; she had never really needed him. *But she could have asked me to help find Gene's murderer*, Renner thought. *She could have asked me!*

He sat there, in that lonely, death-haunted apartment, until small shadows formed in the corners. Then the shadows ran together to become one big shadow and it was night again and still he did not move. The white, well-shaped hands that could beat out seven-

ty-five words on a typewriter were as still as death on the padded arms of the chair. He was a medium-built man with fine brown hair, getting a little thin and beginning to pull away from his temples. His eyes were a level blue, with laugh wrinkles, long unused now, at the corners. A lonely man, no longer young.

The girl in the cab—that was all he could think of. Twice Renner reached for the phone to call Barragar and tell him about the girl, and both times he drew back his hand.

He had to do this alone. It was something that Helen could not do for herself.

There was one other reason why he had to do this his own way. He couldn't describe the girl; he'd have to see her.

He couldn't describe the cabbie either, but he was certain he could pick him out of a crowd.

IT WAS nearly seven o'clock when he walked into the Circle Cab offices. The girl on duty was powdering her nose, ready to leave for the day. "We aren't allowed to give out such information," she said, sing-song fashion. "If there's any complaints I'll give you a form to fill out."

"Nothing like that," Renner said. "I just wanted to talk to the driver."

"Sorry," she said, and banged a drawer shut. "If you've lost something, the lost and found department will—"

"Forget it," Renner said shortly.

He went back outside. A couple of drivers came out of the sprawling cab garages. Neither was Renner's man.

He watched them cross the street and enter the big cafe on the corner. A huge neon sign said, *Green Lite Cafe—We Never Close*. It was brightly lit, and a juke box was pumping music out into the street. Renner followed the two cabbies inside.

The stools around the horseshoe counter were about half taken up, mostly by cab drivers. Renner found a seat where he could look down both arms of the counter. He studied all the men's faces. None rang the bell for him.

A girl in a pink uniform put a glass of water in front of him. She didn't look like a waitress. Her wide, sulky mouth and restless eyes belonged to a girl who got more thoughtful attention than a waitress. A full, curved body strained the pink uniform.

"Do most of the drivers from the cab company eat in here?"

"I guess they all come in," she said indifferently, "some time during the day or night. Why?"

"I'm looking for a driver," Renner said. "I don't know his name or number. I just thought I might see him in here."

The waitress shrugged. "Maybe you will, if you stay long enough. What shift is he on?"

"Night shift. He picked me up in front of the Legion Stadium once around midnight."

The waitress' eyes fixed on Renner for a quick second. "What does he look like? Maybe I know him."

"I couldn't describe him," Renner said. "I'd have to see him."

"What do you want with him?" she

persisted. "I mean, if you lost something—"

"No," Renner said briefly. The girl's interest puzzled him. "Just wanted to talk to him. Maybe he'll come in for dinner."

"Maybe." Her voice was sulky now. She waited to see if Renner was going to say anything more, but when he merely ordered a bottle of beer she moved away.

Renner drank his beer. The dinner rush began to slacken off. Nearly fifty drivers had come in during the hour and a half, and he hadn't seen a familiar face.

He went outside again, debated momentarily about going back to the cab office, and discarded the idea. He might have to explain why he wanted the driver, and when the cab company learned it had to do with a murder they'd have the police in, for their own protection. Renner didn't want Barragar in on it. Not yet.

He took a bus downtown and, out of habit, he went into a restaurant and ordered dinner. He left most of it on his plate. Then he found a movie he hadn't seen, being very careful to pick a song-and-dance picture that didn't require any thinking on his part. It was loud and cheerful, and almost succeeded in making him forget. Then the news reel came on and he saw shots of the Southwest Tournament, with Helen in brief white tennis shorts efficiently chopping down a bewildered young opponent with blazing forehand shots. Renner got up quickly and left.

The same waitress was still on duty in the Green Lite Cafe. Her suddenly

watchful expression told Renner she remembered him. He ordered another beer and then eliminated the three or four cab drivers desultorily drinking their coffee.

The waitress came back with his beer. "You still looking for that driver?"

Renner nodded. In a few moments he saw her quietly go to the wall phone. He was positive she was calling someone about him.

Drivers came in from time to time, singly or in pairs, had their coffee and drifted out again. Forty minutes went by. The telephone rang sharply. A driver sitting near it took down the receiver.

"For you, Jessie."

The waitress took it. She held her mouth close to her cupped hand and talked briefly. She hung up and came over to Renner. "Another bottle of beer?"

"All right," Renner said.

His glass wasn't empty. She wanted to keep him there now. He wished he knew why. It didn't fit any pattern; a waitress in a cab drivers' cafe half way across town from where Gene Hansen was murdered.

The man didn't come in the front entrance. He came through the kitchen. He was heavy-set, broad across the chest, and with arms a little too long in proportion. His whiskers were black and heavy; a close shave had left his face blue. He was bare headed. He slipped into the stool nearest the swinging door to the kitchen, on the opposite arm of the horseshoe. He kept behind a glass-enclosed pie case.

Renner reached for a salt shaker, the motion pulling him to an angle where he could see around the end of the case. For their glances locked and something came alive in the man's eyes. Then he dropped his face to sip from his coffee cup. He was no one Renner had ever seen before.

The instant Renner sat back so that the case obstructed his view, the man slid off his stool and vanished into the kitchen.

Renner came to his feet and walked swiftly out the front door. The cafe was on a corner, and he swung down the side street to the rear of the building. The alley was lighted only by the feeble glow of light escaping from the high rear windows. A sudden roar of a motor starting in second warned Renner in time. He pulled up sharply as a cab spurted out of the alley, almost grazing him, and then went zooming down the side street. The driver was the blue-jowled man; now he wore the regulation green company cap. Renner got a quick flash of the license number before the cab turned a corner: LC7355.

## CHAPTER TWO

RENNER'S STOMACH was fluttering slightly as he went back into the cafe. The waitress, standing by the cash register on the loop of the horseshoe counter, flushed when he opened the door.

She blurted, "You didn't pay for that last bottle of beer."

"Didn't I?" Renner said. "I thought I did."

"I don't think so," she said. "But maybe I forgot."

Renner took some money out of his pocket.

"Do you think you paid me?" She was badly flustered now.

"I don't know," Renner said. He pushed some change toward her. "I'll pay you now. That'll settle the whole matter. And you can bring me another one."

She got him another bottle. "Has your—the driver you wanted—has he come in yet?"

Renner ignored her question. "Your name's Jessie?"

She gave him a frightened look. "How did you know?"

"I heard someone call you that," Renner said.

She didn't believe that. Her restless eyes were jittery with some hidden fear. "Maybe—maybe he won't come now," she said, almost in a whisper. "Not this late. It's nearly midnight."

The Green Lite was filling up now. Renner made each bottle of beer last a little longer. He didn't want to be high. Everything was meaningless, but only because he was missing some important knowledge. He had to be able to think.

A drunk with a strong whiskey breath slumped down on the next stool, jostled Renner with a careless elbow.

"Easy does it, friend," Renner said. "There's beer for everybody."

The drunk looked at him belligerently from small, greenish eyes. His face was heavy and stupid looking, and his mouth resembled the letter-drop in a mail box. He weaved uncertainly in

his chair, almost falling into Renner's lap. Renner pushed him back onto his own stool.

"Oh, gettin' tough, eh?" the drunk mumbled, and gave Renner a clumsy, ill-timed shove.

Renner slipped off his stool and then waited, feeling helpless. He didn't want to hit a drunk, and he didn't want a brawl. The cab drivers were grinning at his dilemma. The drunk came off his seat weaving forward, his fists up like something out of an old boxing print. He was bigger than Renner, and heavier. But he was very drunk. And Renner, while no prize-fighter, had a sports' writer's technical, if academic, knowledge of boxing. He knew enough to brush aside the man's ineffectual right swing with his left hand and counter with a short, hard right.

And then something exploded against Renner's jaw and the lights spun dizzily. The room fell apart like shattering crystal. A wall, moving up behind Renner, kept him on his feet momentarily. The drunk, suddenly light on his feet, moved in swinging. The wall behind Renner dropped away and he slipped sideways into a thick black smoke.

Water pouring over his face brought him around. Someone had loosened his collar. He opened his eyes and saw a wizened-faced man in the familiar green cap beaming cheerfully down at him.

"You're all right, chum," he said. "You're fine. You don't wanna feel bad. It happened to Joe Louis onct, tpo."

Renner struggled to his feet, the little man lending a hand. "Where'd he go?" Renner said thickly.

"About ten blocks away by now." The little man said thoughtfully. "He handles his fists pretty good for a drunk."

"That's what I thought," Renner said, brushing off his clothes. He reached into his pocket for his handkerchief, and his fingers encountered his billfold. He stiffened. He never kept his billfold in that pocket.

"What gives here?" he snapped. "Did I get rolled while I was out? Someone had my billfold out of my pocket."

"Nothin' like that," said the little cabbie. "Jessie thought we ought to take you home if it was around close by. She took a look to get your address. You're a long ways off your beat, ain't you, chum? What you doin' away over on this side of town?"

Renner sat down and rested his aching head in his hands. "I'm looking for someone—a cabbie. Just thought I might see him in here."

Jessie brought him a glass of water. She was watching him intently. The incident with the drunk was staged, and Renner thought he knew why. They wanted to know who he was; they had to get a look at his billfold.

"Did you know that drunk?" Renner demanded.

"No," she said, evading his gaze. "Never saw him before."

"Hey," the little cabbie said. "This guy you're looking for—why don't you go across to the office and ask them to let you see the pictures? You know

the one every driver has of himself in his cab? Well, they got duplicates across the street."

"They won't let me see them."

"Sure they will," the little man said confidently. "Tell the girl Jake sent you over. She'll help you out."

Maybe there'd be a different girl on duty now, and with Jake's reference it might work this time. Renner was feeling better now. He was all right once he knew where he was going, but he didn't like to jump blind.

He left some change on the counter to pay for his last bottle of beer—or as a tip if he had paid for it—and went outside and across the street to the cab office.

"I'd like to look at your picture files," Renner told the girl. It was a different one. "I'm trying to find a cabbie whose name I don't know. He covered the Legion after the fights last night, if that will help any. Jake—across the street—he said you'd help me."

The girl went into another office and returned presently with a stack of 4 by 4 photographs and spread them out on the counter. "Look them over," she invited.

Renner pawed through the pictures, studying each face carefully. He had gone through about fifteen when he came to the one he was looking for. He recognized the man instantly. "This is it," he told the girl. "Can I get in touch with him?"

"Is it important?"

"Yes," Renner said. "I want to talk to him."

"It'll take a few minutes. I'll have him call you if you'll leave a number."

"I'll be across the street in the cafe."

"Right," she said. "I'll have him call you there." She looked at the back of the photograph. "His name is Gus Drake."

"Thanks. My name is Renner." He hesitated. "Could you tell me who has license number LC7355?"

The girl gathered up the photographs and took them into the other office. She came back and said, "Louie Fisk's cab. Do you want to talk to him too?"

"No," Renner said. "I guess not."

**H**E WAS inside the cafe before he saw the two cops. One of them was talking to Jessie, but he stopped and turned around as Renner entered. The other cop had been studying the selections on the juke box. They closed in on Renner from two directions.

"You the guy who was in the fight here a little while ago?"

"It wasn't much of a fight," Renner said. "Just a drunk. Who reported it?"

"I wouldn't know, mister." The cop had a notebook out. "I'll have to have your name and address."

Renner gave it to him.

"Where do you work?"

"At the *Sun*. Sports."

The cop wrote it down, frowning. "Renner . . . You're the guy who found the body in the Hansen case?"

Renner nodded briefly.

"You're in the wrong end of town." The cop studied what he had written in his notebook. "Guess we better go on downtown. If everything isn't right, Homicide will want to know."

"The hell with it," Renner said suddenly. "There's no reason for this. The

drunk got out of line and took a swing at me—anybody here will tell you that. I'm not laying any charges. Forget the whole thing."

The cop studied Renner uncertainly. "I better not take any chances. Maybe Homicide will want to talk to you."

Renner didn't move. "I'm meeting someone here. Call Lieutenant Barragar if that's what's bothering you."

The cop jerked a shoulder at his partner, who strolled outside to the patrol car and put the call in on the two-way radio. In a few minutes he was back. "Barragar wants to talk to him, all right. But he'll come out here. You're to stay around till he gets here."

The other cop shrugged. "Takes it off our hands. But you'd better be here, Renner."

Renner returned to his seat at the counter. He was worried. Barragar wasn't coming out of his way just to spare Renner a trip. Perhaps, suspecting Renner was connected with Gene's death, Barragar had decided the focal point of the murder was here on the wrong side of town.

Things were beginning to move fast now. Renner knew he was on the trail of something, but the few facts were so unrelated and devious, he could make no sense from them. Gene Hansen could have been murdered by the dark-haired girl, because certainly there were enough women in his life. Or it might have been Barragar's suspect, Eddie Plank. But neither of those took into consideration the mysterious actions of Jessie and the cab driver Louie Fisk, nor the big drunk who handled his fists too well. None of them fit

any discernible pattern or form yet.

Ten minutes later the wall phone rang. Somebody yelled: "Anybody here want Gus Drake?"

"That's for me," Renner said. He went over and took the receiver. "Gus," he said, "I was one of your fares last night. You picked me up in front of the Legion after the fights. Remember?"

"Sure," Gus said. "So?"

"A girl got into the cab with me. You drove me home first. It's the girl I'm interested in. I want to know where you took her."

"Hell, mister," Gus Drake complained, "that was last night. I don't remember now. I think it was out on Fitzroy some place."

"Think carefully, Gus. Did you take her there directly? Or did you stop after I got out?"

There was a moment of dead air. "Come to think of it, we did stop. Just around the corner from where you got out. Said she forgot something."

"How long was she gone?"

"Oh, five minutes, maybe ten. Hell, I don't know. She didn't owe me nothing, so I knew she wasn't tryin' to beat me out of a fare. I didn't pay no attention."

"Look," Renner said tensely. "I want to talk to you. I'm at the Green Lite Cafe. Put your flag down and come over and get me."

"You're the boss," Gus said. "About twenty minutes."

"Step on it," Renner said. If Barragar got there first, his campaign to do something for Helen would stop.

On some nameless impulse he put

a nickel in the phone and dialed her number on Arragon Street. "Helen?" he said. "Walt. I'm in a cafe called the Green Lite on Washburn Street. Can you meet me here?"

"Why?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," he said, keeping his voice down. "I remembered something about last night. I've been checking up and some funny things have happened. I thought you'd want to know about it."

She said crisply, "I'll be there as quickly as I can. Don't do anything till I come."

Renner put the receiver back on its hook and shivered. *Don't do anything! Don't ever do anything!*

Renner sat at the counter in the Green Lite Cafe watching the front door, no longer drinking beer to cover his presence there. It didn't matter. Jessie, the waitress, watched him with eyes full of baffled fear. It was a question of who got there first, Gus Drake or Helen or Lieutenant Barragar. On that depended what Renner would do. If it was Gus Drake, Renner would have him find the dark girl's address out on Fitzroy. If Helen came first, they'd take her along. If it were Barragar, Renner would go home. Maybe that was what he should do anyway.

It wasn't any of the three. It was the dark-haired girl of last night:

### CHAPTER THREE

**S**HE SAT down, three stools away. From the corner of his eye Renner examined her tensely. She was very pretty, he decided, but her beauty was

not the clean, washed loveliness of Helen. She was dark and moody, something like Jessie, the waitress, with one big difference. This girl was intelligent. She had brains. Jessie was a waitress.

The girl sipped leisurely, waiting for Renner to make a move. Renner ignored her. It was just too pat. She wasn't there by accident. Whatever her plan was, she could take the first step when she got ready.

The place was fairly empty now, and for the first time all evening the juke box was still. The traffic out on the street had died down. Except for the hum of the refrigerator, the cafe was quiet. But it was a tense quiet; a menacing quiet. Whatever was going to happen would happen soon now. The girl's coming proved that.

Her coffee was almost all gone. A smear of lipstick reddened the rim of her cup. She took a paper napkin and fastidiously wiped it off. The gesture was an affectation in the Green Lite Cafe. She fumbled in her purse and got out a cigarette and put it between her full red lips. She didn't have matches.

She turned toward Renner, pointing the unlit cigarette at him.

"Light?"

He took a folder from the ashtray on the counter between them and skidded it down the counter to her.

She seemed remotely irked, perhaps because he refused to recognize her. She touched a flame to her cigarette and put the match in her saucer. She jiggled the pack of matches in her hand, speculatively regarding Renner

with her dark eyes, making a big show of trying to place him.

"Where have I seen you before?" she said. "And that isn't just an opening line. Your face *is* familiar."

"We shared a cab last night," Renner said, without inflection.

"That's it!" she exclaimed, and her expression might have fooled Renner if so much hadn't already gone before. "We both got in the same cab in front of the Legion after the fights, didn't we?"

Renner nodded, waited for her to carry the ball. She made the move, walking toward him, smiling, to return the folder of matches. Then she propped herself against the edge of the next stool. He waited, curious, to see how she would play it.

She said, almost in an undertone, "You know that it wasn't an accident that I got into your cab last night?"

"I know," he said. "You were trying to find Gene Hansen, weren't you?"

Her eyes were wary. "Of course. He'd mentioned your name—said you were a sports writer. I thought you'd be at the fights. I went and asked somebody to point out all of the sports writers. That's how I found out which one was you."

"Gene must have been glad to see you!" Renner's voice shook a little.

"I didn't kill him." She said it very fast, almost angrily, as if it weren't the first time she had been accused of it. "I didn't even go into your building. The front door was locked. I wrote down the address so I could go back when he was alone and talk to him."

"Somebody killed him," Renner stated. "If you didn't who did?"

The girl looked away. "I wish I knew. You see—Gene and I were engaged." She gave Renner a tiny, uncertain smile. "That's why I couldn't have killed him. . . ."

"Somebody did," Renner repeated stubbornly.

"He told me he had a business partner," she said hopefully.

"Eddie Plank?" Renner asked.

The girl's eyes flickered. "No, that wasn't the name. Gene mentioned that name, all right, but the man I meant was named Sparling. John Sparling."

It didn't mean anything to Renner. "Where can I find him?"

"I saw him once, at the Coral Club. Do you want me to take you there? I have a car." She put her hand on Renner's arm as if a new thought had struck her. "I just remembered—Gene told me that he and Sparling had quarreled over some money and they were no longer partners."

Renner's answer trickled away. A police car had pulled up out in front. Barragar.

Renner stood up quickly. "Drive your car around to the back and up the alley behind the cafe. I'll meet you there. Hurry!"

She had seen the police car too. Renner was already moving toward the kitchen door. Jessie, busy at the cash register ringing up a check, didn't see him fade through the kitchen door. The cook was hunched over the late edition of the *Sun*, spread out on his sandwich board. He didn't look up as Renner slipped out the back door into

the smelly gloom of the dark alley.

The girl's car turned into the alley. Renner was in beside her before it stopped moving. "Straight ahead," he said tersely. "We'll come out on the next street."

She didn't ask him any questions. When they were safely out of the alley, Renner gave her a cigarette and took one himself. His fingers were shaking. He said pointedly, "You know my name."

"I'm Bonnie Cannavino." She looked sideways through her long black lashes. "That's an awful name, isn't it?"

"It's all right," Renner said absently. "It's pretty." He wasn't in the mood to flirt with her. He thought of Helen and he knew why. There'd never be anyone but Helen. The ex-Mrs. Renner, he thought tiredly. She just didn't need him.

THE CORAL CLUB was big and loud and crowded, decorated in scarlet and gold. Renner knew there was flash gambling upstairs for those who could afford it. The stakes were big enough to stun a working man. A headwaiter directed them to a table against the back wall, sneered politely, and deserted them.

Bonnie Cannavino was searching the room with her eyes. "If Sparling's here, I'll spot him," she assured Renner. "I don't want him to see me though. He might remember me. I don't want any more trouble, you understand?"

"Point him out," Renner said. "I'll handle the rest." He was bluffing; he couldn't even handle the headwaiter.

The floor show started and the room went black, except for the spotlight. Time was running out, and Renner gnawed on his lower lip with nervous impatience. Something big was going to break. The strained whiteness about the corners of Bonnie's mouth told him that.

She stood up as soon as the lights came on, no longer concerned about being seen. Suddenly she grasped Renner's arm across the table. "There he is," she said. "Away across the room, up near the front. About three tables back from the dance floor—four or five in from the far wall. See him? A big man—black curly hair, brown suit."

"Got him," Renner said.

Sparling's face was puffy handsome. He was alone at a table, but someone had been with him, because there was another glass on the table and the chair opposite him was pulled away. Even while Renner was taking this in, Sparling casually got up and made his way unobtrusively toward the rear. He paused in a small alcove sheltered by an imitation palm tree to light a cigarette. His movements were nonchalant but constrained, and his eyes darted about the room. Then he tossed the match away and went very quickly through a door in the rear of the alcove.

Perhaps no one else saw him go except Renner and Bonnie.

"Wait here," he said. "I'm going to see what gives." The door probably led to the gambling room but that didn't account for Sparling's furtive actions. Everybody knew there was gambling in the Coral Club.

Renner wended his way between the tables to the alcove. Then he duplicated Sparling's performance before pushing through the unmarked door. He was at the foot of a stairway heavily carpeted in red. His feet made no sound as he swiftly started up the steps.

At the head of the curving stairs were two doors. He could hear faint sounds behind the one straight ahead. Renner went through very quickly and almost tripped over a man sprawled, face down, on the floor.

Renner dropped to one knee beside him. It wasn't Sparling. It wasn't anyone he knew. The man wore a dinner jacket and a white carnation in his lapel and a bump on his temple as big as a golf ball. His breathing was hoarse and uneven.

Sapped, Renner thought. He straightened up, gnawing his lower lip. He was in a small room, bare except for a desk and chair. Behind the desk was the entrance to the gambling room. The sounds were louder now and unmistakable.

There was no knob on the door. The man on the floor undoubtedly manipulated it with a concealed button. Renner didn't waste time searching for it. He stepped over the man and went back outside to the landing. He tried the other door. It opened on to an inside fire escape. Disappointed, Renner wheeled away.

And then the gunfire started. It came from the gambling room, three shots muffled by soundproofing, but sharp and vicious.

Renner plunged back into the ante-

room. This time he did trip over the man on the floor and sprawled headlong.

Simultaneously, the locked door to the gambling room crashed open. Renner, on his hands and knees, caught just a flash of running men. *Holdup!* he thought. Then something crashed down on the back of his head, flattening him out on his face.

Black haze eddied up around him and almost engulfed him, but he clung frantically to the ragged end of consciousness. With a tremendous effort he dragged himself up above smoke. The door to the gambling room was closed and locked again; someone was throwing heavy shoulders against the locked door. The man in the dinner jacket showed no inclination to get up and push the button for them.

Weaving unsteadily, Renner stepped high to get over the sprawled form and out to the landing. Either the sound of the shots had penetrated downstairs, or there was a phone connection. Someone rounded the curve in the stairway, running head down at full speed. Renner made the inside fire escape in two jumps.

He didn't dare to be found here. He already had more than he was sure he could handle. Bonnie Cannavino would have to take care of herself. He was sure she could.

At the foot of the fire escape Renner shoved open a metal-covered door and stepped outside into a stygian areaway. The door, swinging shut behind him, cut off the sounds of confusion in the Coral Club. Moving blindly in the darkness, he felt his way along the al-

ley and ran smack into the rear end of a car.

In the light of a match he saw a familiar green taxicab with the white circle on the back. Then he saw the license number. LC7355. It was the cab that had almost run into him in the alley back of the Green Lite cafe. Louie Fisk's cab, according to the girl at the cab offices.

Renner pulled open the front door. Louie Fisk was there, slumped over the wheel, his cap caught between the left-hand door and his shoulder. There was a bump on the back of his head just as big as on the man upstairs. Louie was breathing too.

But the fellow in the back wasn't. He'd been shot behind the ear, and a trickle of blood had run down his neck. He was on his knees, half crouched, because he was a big man and there wasn't enough room for him to flatten out.

Renner pulled the man's head back far enough to permit a look at his face. It was the drunk who had slipped over the fast punch in the Green Lite Cafe. He'd never pull that trick again. Murder had walked up behind him, too. He was riding a green hearse.

Renner started down the alley, dog-trotting toward a distant light. Before he even came out onto the street, he heard at least three police sirens competing with each other on their way to the Coral Club.

Too late, he thought.

He was sure he knew now why Gene Hansen had been murdered. Gene had known that the Coral Club was going to be held up. Possibly he'd

been part of the gang once, then had lost his nerve and pulled out. That fitted his character. Someone had been afraid that he would queer the job. So someone had killed him. But the job was queered anyway. What had gone wrong here? Who had killed the fake drunk? Renner didn't know; he wasn't a cop. He should never have tried to make like one. He wondered if Barragar could have stopped the holdup if he'd had Renner's information. It wasn't a happy thought.

## CHAPTER FOUR

**H**ELEN WAS sitting alone in a booth in the Green Lite Cafe when Renner walked in. There was a little pile of cigarette stubs in the ash tray before her. Renner knew she was really upset. She never smoked when she was competing in tournaments. She wore a light coat over a dress he'd never seen before, a dress he hadn't bought her. She looked fresher than this afternoon; the redness was gone from her eyes.

*Beautiful, Renner thought. I wish she were mine.*

"Where were you?" she demanded. "I've been waiting for nearly an hour!"

"I'm sorry," Renner said. "I got a lead and I had to run it down. Where's Barragar? Didn't he come?"

"He came, but he got tired of waiting. He went to the apartment to see if you might have gone there. What in the world's happened, Walt? Where have you been?"

Renner didn't answer her question. "I'll call and see if I can catch Barragar. Then I'll tell you both everything. . . .

I know why Gene was killed, Helen."

Her hand closed tightly on his wrist. "Who, Walt? Tell me—who did it?"

"I don't know who—just why. It isn't nice," he said, trying to prepare her. "He was mixed up in something bad."

She took it like a champion, closing her eyes briefly. Renner left her alone. He went over to the wall phone and dialed his apartment. There was no answer.

"Hey, you—Renner." It was the cab driver, Gus Drake. "You wanted me to come over here," Drake said aggrievedly. "So all right, I'm here. I've been waiting around on my own time for a half hour. What gives?"

Renner said, "Wait for a few minutes longer, Gus. There's somebody coming who wants all the dope on the girl. You'll get paid."

He started back toward Helen. Then, abruptly, he changed his course and went on to the juke box in the corner. The door had opened and John Sparling was coming in. He had one hand in his right-hand coat pocket and there was a look of cold fury on his face.

*Got to keep Helen out of this*, Renner thought. Through the big front window he could see a car, with its motor running, and a small hunched figure at the wheel. Sparling moved up behind Renner, and Renner felt the hard nudge of a gun.

"Outside," the big man said in a grating undertone, "and no fuss."

Renner still had his nickel in his hand. Feverishly he ran his eye down the list of records on the juke. There

was an old cowboy song, maybe Helen would catch on. . . . He dropped the nickel in the slot, shrugged, and went outside.

The hunched figure at the wheel of the car leaned over and pushed open the front door.

"Get in," Sparling snarled. He slammed the door behind Renner and got into the back seat. He had the gun in sight now. The hunched little man started the car. He was bent grotesquely over the wheel, frightfully deformed, Renner saw, with a great hump bowing his shoulders and neck. But he drove the car skillfully.

As they pulled away, Renner could hear the *Sons of the Pioneers* singing *Follow the Stream* on the juke box.

"Is it all right if I ask what this is all about?" \*

"The money," Sparling said. Rage made him almost incoherent. "We want it without any talk. Where is it?"

"I haven't got any money," Renner said. "I don't know what you're talking about." But he did. Obviously Sparling had worked a robbery at the Coral Club and then somebody else had run off with the loot.

Sparling hit him across the back of the head with the flat of his gun. Pain shot through Renner's head and stabbed the back of his eyeballs.

"That's just a warning," Sparling said. "We're not going to fool about this."

Renner didn't say anything.

"Maybe he's had time to take it home," the hunchback suggested.

"Drive us there." They knew where he lived, Renner realized.

He held to the forlorn hope that they would encounter Lieutenant Barragar on the way up the stairs to his apartment. He had no such luck. They met no one.

Inside the apartment, Sparling knocked him roughly into a chair. He handed the hunchback the gun. "Watch him, Wiley," he said. "I'll shake down the place."

It didn't take Sparling long to go through the entire apartment, starting with the living room and working back to the bedroom. He didn't find what he was looking for.

"We're going to have to make you talk," he said. "Tell us where the money is or we'll beat it out of you."

Renner just shrugged. The meaning of the dead man in the areaway back of the Coral Club was obvious. He'd been in the way of whoever took the money.

"Just a minute." Wiley the hunchback had found one of Helen's tennis rackets, still in its press. He loosened the nuts and slipped the racket out and laid it aside. There was a glitter of sadistic anticipation in his black eyes. "Get his hands behind him, John," he said. "This press is as good as a thumb screw."

Renner lunged for the gun, now back in Sparling's hand. He knew they wouldn't kill him as long as they thought he had the loot from the Coral Club. The struggle was brief and one-sided. Renner never had a chance; he was a sports writer, nearly forty. Just a little man, no longer young. . . .

Sparling smashed him across the head with the gun.

When he shook himself out of the black fog, his hands were strapped behind him with his own belt. He was on his knees with his face on the leather chair, in the same position in which Gene had died. There was agony in his thumbs. They had put them between the frames of the press and were tightening the screws slowly.

"I think we can crush the bone," the hunchback said judicially. It was probably a bluff, but that didn't help much. "Let us know when you're ready to talk, Mr. Renner."

"I don't know where the money is," Renner gasped. Pain was shooting up his arms and into his neck and fanning out at the base of his skull. His stomach was full of nausea, and he thought he passed out again. . . .

**S**OMEONE was pounding on the door. A heavy voice shouted, "Open up. This is the law."

Sparling swore furiously. He had the gun in his hand and was backing away from the door. Wiley the hunchback stood rooted with indecision. The door rattled under a shoulder, and Sparling ran suddenly into the bedroom, Wiley close behind. Renner struggled to his feet and wrenched one thumb free, losing some skin in the process. Wiley, squealing in fear, hobbled frantically back from the bedroom, looking for a rear door.

Renner flung himself across the back of the hunchback's short legs, like a football player throwing an illegal block. Wiley's too-large head snapped backwards against the sudden pressure on his curved neck. The crack of some-

thing giving was audible to Renner's ears.

The next moment, Gus Drake, the cabbie, and Helen piled into the room.

"Where's Barragar?" Renner gasped.

"He hadn't come back yet," Helen cried. "We didn't wait when I understood your signal."

"Some bluff, huh?" Gus said grinning. "Hell, they thought I was a cop!"

Renner crossed to the bedroom door, twisted the knob and flung the door open. There were no shots. After a moment he looked cautiously around the corner. The bedroom window was open. It was ten feet to the ground, but Sparling had jumped, leaving his crippled partner behind. The drop had been too far for the hunchback.

Renner ran back to the living room. Gus Drake was bending over Wiley. "Hey, this guy's neck's broken!"

"Leave him," Renner ordered. "We've got to find that address on Fitzroy where you took the girl last night. Think you can do it, Gus?"

"Maybe," Gus said. "What about maybe calling some law?"

"We haven't time. We've got to beat Sparling there."

**F**ORTY MINUTES later, Gus said, "I think it was about here. I sort of did keep an eye on her because she acted so funny in front of your place. She walked about a half block back, turned into a doorway somewhere near that little tailor shop."

"You two wait," Renner said. "I'll scout the situation."

"Be careful, Walt," Helen said. "Let the police handle this."

Renner just walked away doggedly. He didn't know he possessed this much determination. He wasn't a hero—just a tired little man fighting to hold on to something he could no longer put a name to.

He found the little tailoring shop, and beside it was a narrow doorway opening into a flight of stairs that went up steeply between two green-painted plaster walls. At the top a thin line of light showed beneath a door.

Renner hesitated; they would have a secret knock. He tried a couple of hurried, scrambled raps that might pass for a signal. It worked. The door came open a crack and Bonnie Cannavino peeked out. She gasped and tried to slam the door, but Renner was too fast for her.

"I guessed you'd be here," he said. "And in case you haven't realized it yet, I've guessed all the rest of it, too. It isn't going to work."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Bonnie said. "I just this minute walked in."

"Look," Renner said, "it isn't going to work! The police will be here any minute. I know that John Sparling and the hunchback and that phony drunk held up the Coral Club. Then you sapped Louie Fisk and shot the drunk and grabbed all the loot."

Bonnie got a cigarette out of her purse. She still had no matches. "Okay," she said. "Sure I've got the money, but it's in a safe place. You help me get clear and I'll cut you in."

"Just like you were going to cut Gene Hansen in—before you double-crossed him?"

"I wasn't going to split with Gene or anybody," she said. "Sure I crossed Big John Sparling, but he was getting ready to leave me for that fat blonde he thinks I don't know about!"

"Whose idea was it, sticking up the Coral Club?" Renner asked.

"John's" she said. "But Wiley—the hunchback—worked out all the plans. He's the brains. Wiley's smart. I think he killed Gene. Or maybe it was Eddie—the phony drunk who slugged you. At the Coral Club, he went down the fire escape first with the money in a suitcase, while John and Wiley covered the getaway. Eddie was the only one everybody trusted," she explained. "Louie Fisk was waiting in his cab. Nobody would expect a gang to use a taxi for a getaway car. Smart, eh? Wiley thought of that too."

"Wiley got his neck broke," Renner said dispassionately. "Sparling's running like a rat without a hole. That leaves you all alone."

"Just like I planned it," Bonnie grinned. "As soon as you left me at the table in the Coral Club, I slipped out the back door. In the dark, Louie Fisk never knew what hit him. I was going to slug Eddie the same way, but he turned a flashlight on me. I had to shoot him then. You can understand that. I couldn't do anything but shoot."

"Then you grabbed the suitcase and ran?"

"Sure," she said. "I ran around to the parking lot and got my car."

"Did you bring the money here?"

"I've got it," she said, laughing at him, "but not here. You help me to

get clear and you'll get your cut. You can trust me—I've told everything, haven't I?"

"Why come back here? Why didn't you keep going? Sparling is going to be hard to handle."

Bonnie was fumbling again in her purse for matches. "He doesn't even suspect me. You're the clay pigeon in this deal, my friend. Why do you think I took you to the Coral Club? So I'd have somebody to throw to my pal John. You're in this, Renner. You've got to cover me."

"Wiley wasn't the only smart one," Renner said.

"John's smart too," Sparling said from the bedroom door. "Yeah—John's smarter than all of you." He had his gun pointed at them. "I'm going to get all the money. Eddie's shot, and Wiley's got a broken neck, and the cops will have Louie by now. That leaves just me!"

"And me," Bonnie said viciously.

Her hand was still in her purse, searching for matches. She was lucky. That was the only way she could have got him. She fired through the purse.

Sparling took three in the stomach before he even realized what was happening. He managed to get his gun aimed at her, but by then it was too late. There just wasn't enough strength left in his fingers to squeeze the trigger. He went slack in the joints, stumbled to his knees. He still wasn't convinced he couldn't pull the trigger. Bonnie shot him again as he was going down.

Then Renner stepped up and wrenches the gun from her. She fought ferociously for it, and suddenly Renner

had all he could take. He hit her squarely on the point of the chin. For one quick passing moment of blind rage he wished it were Helen's chin he had socked. . . .

"As I understand it," Renner told Helen while they waited for the police, "John Sparling was going to discard Bonnie for some other woman—a blonde—so Bonnie planned to take all the loot from the Coral Club robbery. But she had to have a clay pigeon to take suspicion off herself; otherwise she'd be hunted by the others the rest of her life. So she caused a fight between Gene and John Sparling—who had to keep up the pretense of Bonnie being his girl until after the holdup. As a result Gene walked out on the gang. That, of course, was just what she wanted. Gene was the original pigeon."

"Who killed Gene?" Helen was curiously subdued.

"Sparling, I guess," Renner said. "He was afraid Gene might get conscience-stricken and talk, so he eliminated him. They had too much at stake to take any risks. Bonnie was looking for Gene, too, so he would be available for suspicion, but John Sparling found him first."

The night was full of screaming sirens now.

"That left Bonnie without her clay pigeon. That's where I came in," Renner said wryly. "Substitute pigeon. I started nosing around, trying to locate Gus Drake, and the gang found out about it. The waitress at the Green Lite is Louie Fisk's girl. She knew enough to call for Louie, and Bonnie

was sent to keep me occupied until after the holdup. But Bonnie took me to the Coral Club and made sure Sparling saw me. Then, when Sparling discovered what had happened to Eddie and Fisk, he was sure Gene had sold them out and I had hijacked the loot. In other words, Bonnie's plan worked perfectly up to that point."

"They should have known you wouldn't steal that money," Helen said. "Not you. It's ridiculous!"

Renner shrugged. He didn't know now what he might do under certain circumstances. He'd done things tonight he still didn't believe. . . .

"When you and Gus scared Sparling out of the apartment, he came back here to hide. He beat Bonnie home, and he heard us talking and got the whole picture. So Bonnie killed him—and I slugged Bonnie."

Helen didn't say anything. Her eyes held a baffled look.

"I never hit a woman before," Renner said, brooding a little. "I hit her pretty hard, but she had it coming." He moved closer to Helen. "Tonight I was slugged on the jaw, beaten over the head with a gun, and had my thumbs damn near crushed in a racket press. It seemed enough for one night. You understand? I was ready to hit *somebody*. It happened to be a woman. But I don't feel bad about that. I'd do it again if I had to. You understand that?"

She nodded, her eyes wide.

"Then we'll tell Barragar the story and go home," Renner said.

And his wife said, "Yes, Walt. Whatever you say." ♦♦♦

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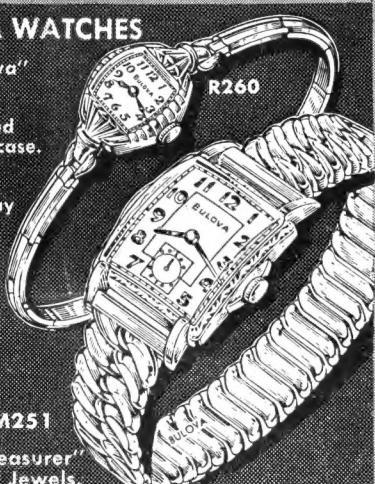


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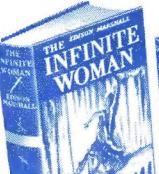
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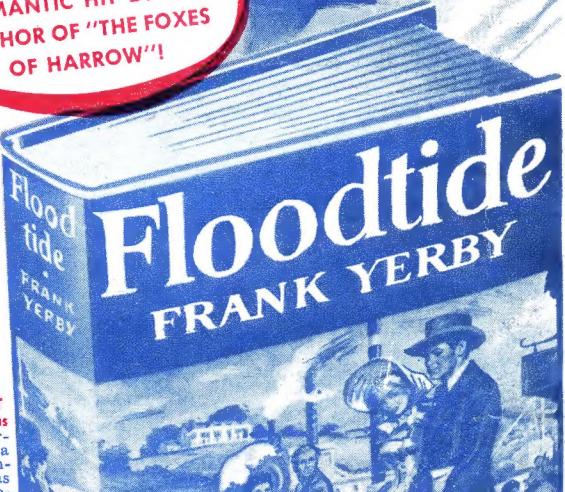
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